Heroes of Mobius: 15 Years Later

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The sequel series to Heroes of Mobius. Here we get to see the lives of our heroes 15 years after the events of HOM. New heroes are formed, new villains arise and new adventures are upon us as our heroes live their lives, older and different, but mostly the same people we know and love and epic battles are raged as Mobius is in for a whole new horde of adventures! Co-written by TCH2

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Heroes of Mobius: 15 Years Later

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Rising Evil: Prologue

Author's Notes: This story is a sequel series to my long-running fanfic series Heroes of Mobius. So you can expect a LOT of references to that series. It is highly recommended you read Heroes of Mobius before this one.

Also there will be some slightly more mature themes in this story to fit in with the more adult approach of the characters and their statuses in life. But there will still be some lighter moments so it will still have some of that good old Sonic formula. ^^

As for the format, it'll be more like the Marvel Cinematic Universe in how it's a series of stories all leading up to a big event as opposed to the episodic format of the original. Reason being that it'll be easier to juggle the characters this time.

OK then, on with the series!

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Prologue: Peace on Mobius

Everything seemed so calm. Calm and still. It was something that nobody really realized until they got a moment to just stand and stare, admiring the simple beauty and harmony of a world at peace.

This feeling was shared by the famed Hero of Mobius himself, Sonic the Hedgehog. Born with fantastic super speed thanks to a power ring used to save his mother from dying before she could give birth to him, the hedgehog had been used to being surrounded by wonder and amazement. His very existence was nothing short of miraculous given the powers he had and how effectively he had used them to become the biggest hero the world of Mobius had ever witnessed.

He had lived an extraordinary life filled with adventure and amazement since the day he had been able to run. His life of heroism had first begun when he had saved his parents from a group of thugs that had kidnapped them when he was just a boy. Then came the year of 2140, the year where his life had changed forever. Mobius was invaded by a maniacal genius named Dr. Eggman, a man who wanted to live in a robot utopia. He had mistakenly chosen Mobius to be his Eggman Empire and Sonic had shown him why choosing such a world was such a foolish idea. What had followed was a war between Mobius and the Eggman Empire that had lasted well into the year 2142, said war ending with Eggman being incinerated as his flying fortress, the Death Egg, had been destroyed by Knuckles the Echidna's wicked uncle, Dr. Finitevus.

Although the evil echidna had made things easier for Sonic and friends by doing so, he was quick to take over and initiate his own evil plans. In 2143, he had orchestrated a very complex scheme that saw him duplicating the Chaos Emeralds, increasing their numbers from nine (eight ordinary emeralds and one Master Emerald) to one-hundred and eight. This gave him the power to become the might demi-god, Enerjak with their incredulous power. His actions were supposed to have led to the end of the world but thanks to Silver the Hedgehog and Blaze the Cat warning the heroes about it by travelling back to the past on several occasions, Sonic and friends had become prepared for the eventuality and were eventually able to overcome Enerjak before the world could be destroyed by his raw power.

It was now July the 21st, 2144. It had been a whole year since the Day of Enerjak had been ceased by Sonic and the Royal Fighters Service. And as Sonic the Hedgehog himself stood by a grand looking window and gazed out into the horizon, he reflected back on what had happened back then. He still remembered it all from watching Finitevus transform into Enerjak to becoming Hyper Sonic and putting an end to the mad scientist's attempted razing of the world. It still mad him shudder to think that a year ago on this very day, Mobius should've been in ruins with little life left on it, a world

that his future friends had come to know as their home. And yet here he was, alive and well and gazing out at a beautiful sight outside the windows of Castle Acorn. Stopping Enerjak had made Sonic all the more thankful that he was living the kind of life he was living now.

But as he admired the scenery outside, he had come to realize something he had never realized before. How suddenly very quiet and still the world truly was. He was so used to moving so fast that the world had always seemed a blur to him. Not so much now he was living a more easy-going existence with very little threats going on in the world. The demise of Eggman and the destruction of Enerjak truly had brought peace to Mobius. Maybe too much peace though. Was it too much? Sonic had often thought about that. He had always seen life as one big adventure. But with the world so at peace now, life suddenly seemed very uneventful. It almost felt as if it was missing something, a kind of spark that gave it the life he always thought it had. The Hero of Mobius sighed to himself, annoyed he was having such thoughts.

"Don't think like that." he muttered, "There's more to life than just adventure. You should know that by now."

He then reached up and took the golden crown he wore on his head off, and then lowered it down so he could gaze at it. He noticed his rather unflattering reflection vaguely visible in the shiny polished crown staring back at him. The eyes looked bored and lacking the sparkle that he often saw in them when he looked at himself. Sonic was now 18 years old and more than just the Hero of Mobius. He was the King of New Mobotropolis. He and Queen Sally Acorn had gotten married not long after Enerjak had been destroyed and although he was still learning, Sonic had slowly adapted to the royal life. Sometimes he had to be true to his wife and stick to his duties but other times, he had the freedom to be himself, times he enjoyed immensely. He stared at his crown as if wondering if it could tell him something.

"Ah who am I kidding?" he sighed, "Adventure WAS your life Sonic the Hedgehog. You were so fun when you were just free as the wind,

running around and saving innocents from crazy mad scientists, evil ninja clans, invading aliens and more. And yet with the world in perfect harmony…it feels as if there's no adventure anymore."

He shook his head sadly as he put the crown back on his head.

"I guess the world is just too slow for me, or I'm too fast for the world." he mused, "I don't get to have as much fun and excitement as I did before with so little crime going on now. I'd give anything, anything if I could just have the kinda of excitement I once craved and loved."

His ears then suddenly twitched as he picked up the sound of heels rapping on the marble floor. He knew who's feet those heels belonged to without needing to turn around and see for himself. He smiled as he saw his beautiful wife enter the hallway. There was something about Queen Sally where she could somehow lighten the mood just by showing up. Sonic noticed that she was wearing an elegant mint-green dress with no shoulder traps that emphasized how graceful her figure was. Sally walked up to her king, smiling at him every step of the way. She then wrapped her arms around Sonic and embraced him tenderly. Sonic returned the gesture, rubbing noses with her before the two shared a loving kiss.

"Hello my handsome hedgehog." Sally purred softly.

"Ditto to you." Sonic replied, "How's it going?"

"It was quite pleasant really." the chipmunk replied cheerfully, "I spent the morning with Nicole and hearing the news she was picking up. Mobius is in for another peaceful day today."

"Oh great Sal, that's…just great." the hedgehog said, trying to sound enthusiastic, "Good to see our hard work in bringing peace to the world is still paying off."

"Sonic, you're such a bad actor." Sally teased, poking him in the chest, "It's obvious you're bummed out at the fact there's no

doomsday robot for you to smash."

"You sure know me don't ya Queenie?" Sonic retorted, a playful smirk spreading across his lips.

"More than you think Sonic boy." the queen snickered.

Sonic tried to laugh but he couldn't quite bring himself to do so. He wasn't going to betray his feelings any longer and just be honest for once. He rubbed the back of his head uncertainly as he tried to pick the right words to say.

"Don't get me wrong Sal, I love my world as it is now." he said, "It's great that we're all happy and free like we wanted. But you can understand why I feel a little, you know…down right?"

"I do understand sweetie." Sally responded, gently stroking her husband's face, "You'd gotten so used to a life of adrenaline and action that suddenly living as you are now, it feels a little underwhelming in comparison doesn't it?"

"At times I wonder why I bother talking since you're so good at summing my thoughts up for me." Sonic chuckled.

Sally raised an eyebrow in mild annoyance but didn't attempt to keep a straight face. She'd gotten used to Sonic's quips over time and knew why he would often use them. It helped him to remain optimistic and happy when he felt down or bored.

"Tell me though Sonic, how much do you miss that kind of life?" she asked curiously, "If you could say, have one wish come true for you, would you wish things back to the way they were or something?"

The very question made Sonic stare at Sally incredulously.

"Sal? You're not serious are you?" he blurted.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" the queen snapped, her face not showing any signs that suggested she was, "Just answer the

question Sonic, and honestly if you please."

"If you say so." the hedgehog shrugged, "I'll admit…I wouldn't go THAT far. I certainly don't want Eggman back from the dead or Finitevus to rise from his grave and menace us. But I do wish I could have at least one day that feels like the adventures me and my friends once had. We're the guys who've journeyed the world over, fought in other dimensions and once saved the multi-verse from zero hour! I'm not asking for anything of THAT scale though, but at least one action-packed event that brings me back to the days of adventure and action I know and love."

He then looked down at the floor as if expecting Sally to be mad at him for the answer he'd given. But his wife didn't seem angry with him. She looked almost sad to hear that her husband was craving adventure that much. She nodded slowly.

"I understand your feelings Sonic." she said, "Though I'm a little hurt that you feel that way. I'd hoped you'd consider your life as my husband and King of New Mobotropolis to be an adventure. But I guess I was wrong. Maybe even I'm too slow for you…"

"Sal, don't say that!" Sonic protested, feeling guilty that he'd unintentionally hurt his wife's feelings, "Of course you're not too slow for me! If anything, I'm too fast for you! I've made promises to slow down for you Sal and I intend to keep those promises. And don't think for a minute that I'd ever give up my life with you for a day of adventure. It wouldn't be much of one without you queenie and that's the truth."

Sally's downcast eyes suddenly lit up with delight.

"You…you mean that?" she asked.

"Sally, I'm many things but you and I both know that I'm not the lying type." Sonic insisted.

Touched, Sally embraced her husband again and kissed him on the lips. Sonic returned the hug, enjoying the feeling of warmth between him and his beloved queen. He had been true to not just Sally, but himself too. He wouldn't give up her for anything, not even the most exciting adventure he could think of. She made his adventures feel more adventurous and Sonic couldn't be happier. As the two separated, Sally's face lit up again, but her smile seemed to be a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Sonic caught the signs immediately and his face fell.

"Sal? You OK?" he asked.

"Sonic, I had some great news for you but I thought I'd wait for the right moment to reveal it." the royal chipmunk replied, "Are you ready for this?"

"Sally, I'm the guy who took out Enerjak! Of course I'm ready for this!" Sonic sneered, "This hedgehog's ready for anything!"

"We'll see how accurate that statement is." Sally retorted, "I didn't just see Nicole just to hear the news this morning Sonic. I went to see her for something else too. You know how I've been a bit sick and suffering from a few pains lately?"

"Yeah, I know, I actually grew concerned for you." the king nodded, "So I guess you asked Nicole to give you a look over?"

"I did. She scanned me and everything." Sally replied, "And it turns out that the most wonderful thing has happened Sonic. According to Nicole's diagnosis…I…I'm pregnant."

The last word had totally struck Sonic by surprise. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. He felt as if he'd been slapped across the face. He was so stunned he even took a few steps backwards. Sally noticed immediately that her beloved wasn't taking this well, something she'd feared from the start, and she quickly put her arms around him to keep him steady.

"I knew you'd be shocked!" she cried, "I'm so sorry Sonic but I just had to break it to you! I couldn't have kept something as big as this from you so I had to tell you about it!"

Sonic shook his head to get out of his daze and he took a few breaths to ease his nerves. He then looked back at his wife, noticing the dismay in her eyes. Disappointed with himself for reacting so badly to the news, he straightened up and did his best to compose himself.

"Gosh, sorry Sal. I was just…surprised s'all." he said, "Anyway… you're pregnant? Guess I'm still too fast for you after all. But…but… that's pretty swell." he said, a genuine smile spreading across his face, "You're gonna be a mom! And I…I'm gonna be a…a dad! Man I never thought I'd ever say those words!" he gasped.

"So you're not mad or disappointed?"

"Why would I? That's the most amazing thing that's happened to us Sally! We're gonna have a prince or a princess roaming through these halls with us! I think this is the kind of adventure we've been asking for together!"

Sally beamed with delight at her husband's enthusiasm. Maybe she'd under-estimated his feelings and how he would go about the matter. Filled with glee, Sally threw her arms around her husband and pulled him in close, happy tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Oh Sonic…this is one of the happiest moments of my life…" she whispered, "I've always dreamed of being a mother."

"And now it seems your dreams are coming true." Sonic replied, "I bet it'll be great to be a dad."

As optimistic as he sounded, Sonic found himself secretly doubting if he really meant those words. He was going to have a son or daughter! He was now going to be Sonic the Hedgehog, King of New Mobotropolis and a father! But would he able to cope with such a

life-changing event? Could he be a father? Sonic felt that he wouldn't be adequate for parenthood. This wasn't what he'd asked for and not something he'd been clamouring for. But he couldn't let Sally down. She was so happy at the fact she was going to be a mum! He had to be happy for her and do what he could to help raise the child he would soon be fathering. It was going to be a big thing to wrap his head around, but Sonic was not going to let anybody down. He would do what it took to be the father that his child would need…

What a way to kick off this sequel series! Sonic's going to be a father! Will he manage though? Is parenthood the kind of adventure he'll be happy with? Tune in next time as we delve into Sonic's feelings on the matter as he and Sally reveal the big news...

Rising Evil: Chapter 1: Birth of a Child

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 1: Birth of a Princess

It didn't take long for the news to break out. Not that there was any chance at all of keeping it secret. One does not simply keep news of the Queen of New Mobotropolis tightly under wraps and pray people won't notice, not when said Queen had many friends who had to hear the glorious news.

Sonic and Sally had decided to give it until tomorrow to break the news so the king could have a moment to let it sink in more. Sonic was still trying to wrap his head around such a big, game-changing development like this. He was going to be a father! Never in his life had he ever anticipated even the possibility of having a child of his own to raise. He imagined how Jules, his own father, must've felt when his mother Bernie was giving birth to him all those years ago. Had he been excited about it? Had he ever been surprised at the fact he was going to be a parent when Bernie was pregnant with him? Sonic knew for certain he would definitely have to ask his father those questions. Maybe he could even help him come to terms with such a big change in his already extraordinary life. Experience from a parent such as his own would be greatly beneficial to him.

The next day had arrived and Sonic and Sally had been quick to announce that they were now expecting parents. As expected, the whole city was in an uproar of joy upon hearing this. The fact the Hero of Mobius himself was going to be a dad was enough to make anybody excited and ecstatic. But nobody was more happy to hear this than the New Mobotropolis Royal Fighters Team. The team consisted of Sonic's many friends, Miles "Tails" Prower, Cosmo the Seedrian, Amy Rose, Cream the Rabbit, Bunnie Rabboh (formely Rabbot), Wilson the Dog, Mandy the Mouse, Ruben the Water

Panther and Sora Prower. There was also Team Chaotix, which consisted of Espio the Chameleon, Vector the Crocodile and Charmy Bee. Knuckles the Echidna and Shade the Echidna were part of the team too but they weren't in New Mobotropolis at the moment. They were elsewhere, building a new habitat for themselves after the unfortunate destruction of Angel Island back in 2142. Sonic had sent them a letter to let them know and was waiting for a response. Each and every one of his friends wished to express their delight over the exciting news and now, Sonic had invited them all to come into Castle Acorn so they could all gather around and see him and his wife.

The king and queen were seated in different areas of the castle while their friends gathered around them, each taking turns to express their delight. The boys were seeing Sonic and the girls were seeing Sally. Tails was the first for Sonic, being his best friend and all. The young kit embraced Sonic in congratulations and beamed excitedly.

"I can't congratulate you two enough!" he exclaimed, "A whole year of peace on Mobius and now you're gonna be parents!"

"We're very happy for you Sonic." Vector said proudly, giving him the thumbs up, "After all the hard work ya've done for this world, you and Mrs. Acorn deserve something like this!"

"You're too kind, all of you." Sonic said modestly, "But thanks anyway."

"No problem." Ruben chimed in, "It must be a great honour to soon be fathering a prince or a princess Sonic."

"I wouldn't really go that far Ruben as to me, I'm just raising a child. Doesn't matter if it's a prince, a princess or neither." the hedgehog said casually, "To me, it's still my own kid. And to think I never thought I'd ever get to experience what it feels like to be a dad!" he added, a twinge of humour in his voice.

"I doubt any of us would've expected something like that!" Tails chuckled in return, "But anyway...how do you personally feel about the whole thing? This is all a big new thing for you and all so..."

"Yeah Tails, I know what you mean." Sonic said gently, "It's probably the biggest thing to happen to me since the multiverse crisis two years ago. As for how I feel? It's something I'm glad I can express to you guys since this is something I can't just keep in you know?"

"You can tell us everything Sonic." Wilson said kindly, "We'll help you in anyway we can."

Smiling, Sonic nodded. How lucky he felt to have such great friends to talk to about his worries and concerns. He paused for a moment before speaking.

"I'm kinda nervous about the whole thing..." he admitted, "Sure I've got about nine months to get used to the whole thing but still, I've never considered parenthood before. Heck, the one things that are always on my mind is heroism and adventuring! Never once did raising a kid come to mind for me. So the thought that I'm now gonna be a parent...it's kinda scary to me! You understand right?"

His friends nodded slowly.

"I know exactly how it feels Sonic." Wilson said, "Mandy's hoping to have children one day too. The thought of being a parent has me all a tingle since I'm not sure if I'd be a good parent or not. But I'm willing to go through it...for her."

"It might be noble of you to do the same for your fair lady." Espio commented, "Her Majesty would greatly appreciate it."

"Oh I'm sure she would." Sonic said brightly, "And I wanna be there for my little Queenie and support her all throughout her pregnancy! It'd make her so happy." he sighed, the thought of Sally being happy making him feel better already.

"Aww, Sonic wants to make his wife happy! That's so adorable!" Charmy cried, a childish grin spreading across his face.

Sonic smiled queasily and sweat-dropped, unsure how to respond to the comment.

"Uh...yeah, we'll go with that." he chuckled, "Back on topic, one thing I'm really nervous about though is the fact I'm gonna be a dad. I mean...will I be a good dad? I don't know much about raising kids. I know how to run and smash robots but raising kids? I'm a blank slate!" he exclaimed, flailing his arms around for a second, "And normally being the Hero of Mobius would be seen as the trickier task wouldn't it?"

"Well heroism's by far the more life-risking of the two." Vector commented unhelpfully, earning an annoyed nudge in the ribs from Espio.

"That is true but being a parent's more complex than one would think isn't it?" the blue hedgehog asked curiously, "I mean isn't there more to raising a kid then you'd think there is?"

"Well that's something I can't answer." Tails said sadly, "I'm still just a kid myself! But I can faintly recall what it was like living with mom and dad before Eggman got them. They seemed to have to do a lot just to look after me...Sora, my own sister, even put herself up for adoption just so they could raise me even! So I guess sacrifices have to be made when you're a parent..." he added, suddenly realizing that what he was saying wasn't really very reassuring so he decided not to speak anymore. His ears drooped down in shame.

"My parents often told me how stressful it can be to raise a child." Wilson added, "Especially one like me since I was such a skitter-bug back then. Raising a child requires a lot of love, support and as Tails said, sometimes sacrifices have to be made for their sake."

"But it's not all bad." Ruben said, hoping to reassure Sonic for he noticed the blue hedgehog was looking increasingly anxious just

listening to Tails and Wilson, "A lot of parents out there think their kid is the best thing that ever happened to them. I know my parents thought so about me. I'm sure you'll be fine Sonic."

"Yeah, you'll be OK!" Charmy piped excitedly, "I mean Vector's kinda like my dad now and he's doing fine with me!"

"Depends on your definition of "fine" Charmy..." Vector muttered, half-smiling at the comment. Espio sort of smirked in agreement.

Sonic took in what everybody said and turned the words over and over in his head. It seemed that he was right to be anxious about being parent given how tough it sounded. But then he thought about what Ruben had said. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad and he'd actually like having his own kid? Maybe he'd be like those parents who think their kid is the best thing ever. The king still felt unsure but he knew that he still had somebody to ask for advice afterwards. He would go out of the city and visit his parents in Furville later today to talk to them about it. For now, he tried to smile optimistically but instead, he ended up looking queasy.

"Well...you guys definitely gave me...a lot of insight on what it's like being a parent." he said slowly, measuring his words and making sure they weren't the wrong ones, "I'm still nervous about it but I'm grateful to you guys trying to help. You're the best pals a hedgehog could ask for." he said, genuinely sounding thankful.

"Aw Sonic, it's what friends are for." Tails said modestly.

"You're very welcome your majesty." Espio said, bowing politely.

"Espio, don't do the "majesty" thing! Just because I'm king, doesn't mean you have to treat me any differently!" Sonic laughed heartily, "I'm still Sonic ya know!"

"KING Sonic that is." Charmy winked.

Sonic smirked at Charmy in response, knowing full well that the bee liked to kid around. It made him think of how he often teased and made fun of his enemies when fighting them.

"So anyway, thanks for coming guys and I greatly appreciate you all congratulating us on soon to becoming parents." the king said graciously, "It means a lot to me that you could all be there for me at such a time."

"You're the Hero of Mobius and one of our best friends Sonic, it's the least we could do." Wilson said casually.

"You're welcome all the same and I hope you and Sally will be very happy when your baby is born." Tails said brightly.

"I'm sure we will." Sonic replied, not entirely sure if he meant what he'd said...

In another room not far away from where Sonic and the boys were, the girls were all gathered around Queen Sally, expressing their delight and joy over the news. Sally was sitting in a chair, just taking in the congratulatory comments and trying to save face but she ended up looking like she was going to be sick. Deep inside, she was secretly uncomfortable that her friends were making such a fuss over her benign pregnant. Had she known it would be considered THIS big a deal, she'd have rejected the idea of being a mother long ago.

"Oh Sally-girl, ah'm so happy for ya'll!" Bunnie squealed, "Yer gonna be a mom! How excitin' is that?!"

"It's...a big thing that's for sure." Sally said tightly, "You girls seem to be making it feel bigger than it already is though..." she added, trying not to sound rude.

"Sorry your highness." Cream said, curtseying politely, "We're just very happy for you that's all. I hope we're not embarrassing you or

anything..." she added guiltily.

"No, no, it's OK sweetie." Sally said reassuringly, patting Cream's head gently, "I'm just overwhelmed that's all. I know it's quite a big thing, finding out you're pregnant, but I still hadn't anticipated such a response!"

The girls laughed in unison. But what was briefly a happy atmosphere was quickly brought back down to reality as Mandy spoke.

"In all seriousness though, we should tone it down a bit." she said firmly, "The queen can do without all the hassle girls."

"Mandy please, it's OK." Sally protested, "They can still show their delight if they want. Having a baby is a very special occasion."

"It sure is..." the mouse mused more to herself than anybody, "I dream of being a mom too. Wouldn't mind having a kid or two to call my own. Really happy for you right now though Sally." she added sweetly, "I bet you'll have a very, very lovely child for you and Sonic to raise as your own."

"Thank you very much." the queen said graciously, "Though...I'm kinda worried at the same time about this."

She suddenly looked down at the floor and seemed to trail off as if her thoughts had just come back to her all of a sudden. Her guests could see that she was definitely having some anxious thoughts about the whole affair and were quick to try and comfort her.

"Don't worry about it Sally." Amy said casually, "It's normal for a girl to be worried about giving birth. It is a stressful period. But when you have your little son or daughter, you'll agree that it was all worth it."

"It will be indeed." Cosmo added, "That's how my parents felt when I was born. They were very happy and joyful and acted like I was a godsend."

"That's very sweet Cosmo but that's not really what I meant earlier." Sally said uneasily, "I am a little nervous about the birth itself for obvious reasons but what I'm really worried about...is Sonic."

The girls all paused and looked at each other, wondering how to respond to that. They hadn't really thought that Sally would be worried about Sonic for any reason. But as they took it in, they all began to realize what Sally meant.

"Did Sonic not react that well to the news or something?" Sora asked.

"He wasn't...ecstatic when I told him." Sally replied, "In fact, he looked like he was about to have a heart attack bless him! But he seemed to warm up to the idea as it sunk into him though I wonder if he's being true to me or just hiding his own fears...something I actually feared from the start when Nicole confirmed my pregnancy..."

She looked over at the holo-lynx, who stood by her bedside silent as a grave. Nicole glanced at Sally sadly, shaking her head.

"I did warn you Sonic might not be comfortable with the thought of parenthood..." she sighed.

"I had to tell him though Nicole! I can't just be pregnant and expect Sonic not to ask questions!" retorted Sally, "I'm his wife! He's my husband! I can't keep secrets from him like this!"

"I never said you should Sally, but had I been in your shoes, I probably would've waited a while before immediately telling him such a big revelation like that." Nicole replied, her voice calm and controlled.

Sally nodded. Maybe she should've waited a day or two before breaking the news after all. It was too late to turn back now though so she had to just carry on as it is.

"I understand Nicole." she said softly, "But anyway, one thing I wonder is if Sonic will cope with such a big change. Having lived with him for a year, I can tell you right now he's not the "I want kids" type of guy. The thought never once crossed his mind and whenever I asked about it, he'd often be silent and never give a straight answer, preferring to hastily try and change the subject. I'm excited about being a mom and that's the truth...but I worry about Sonic and how he'll manage being a father. Do you think he'll be OK?"

A long silence hung over the Mobians as they all considered the question. It was not an easy one to answer and not a question that could be answered straight away. The thought of Sonic being a dad was not something anybody in the room had ever thought about or even considered for that matter. It wasn't easy trying to answer something in relation to a subject that never once crossed your mind.

"I...really don't know." Amy said, feeling guilty she had to say those words. She knew that wasn't the kind of answer Sally was hoping for and not an answer that would be very helpful, "When I used to fangirl over Sonic I often thought about having kids with him. But looking back, I never really considered Sonic's feelings on the matter so how he'll deal with being a dad is something I really don't know."

"I'm sure Mr. Sonic will be fine though." Cream said optimistically, "He's done many amazing things for us and the world before, he'll be a great dad to your baby Mrs. Acorn!"

"I hope your optimism isn't wasted Cream..." Sally said pessimistically, "As lovely a thought as it is..."

"I suggest that Sonic could receive some kind of schooling." Nicole suggested, "Maybe we could teach him how to raise a child and he'll slowly but steadily get more used to the change and maybe even welcome the idea of parenthood with open arms."

"That's not a bad thought Nicole." the queen admitted, "Though none of us have had experience with raising children. My parents could've helped but...you know..." she paused as she tried to keep a grip on

herself, remembering the grisly fates her parents suffered at the hands of Marik the Martian back in 2141.

"So how can we teach Sonic?" she added.

"Maybe his parents could." Cosmo suggested, "I remember a couple of years ago, Sonic talked to me and Tails about how he became super fast and he said that his parents are still living."

"That's a great idea Cosmo!" Mandy complimented, "Who better to teach Sonic then his own parents! They'll give him all the support he needs!"

"It is a good idea." Sally agreed, "Though I wouldn't be too surprised if Sonic got the same idea." she added, chuckling, "If so then maybe he will be fine after all."

"Maybe he will indeed Sally-girl." Bunnie said reassuringly.

Sally nodded, suddenly feeling all the more optimistic about her pregnancy. They had found a way to help Sonic come to grips with how to be a parent and get him more used to the idea of being a father. Maybe this whole thing would turn out well for them after all...

Much later, the guests had all left the castle and the relative excitement was beginning to simmer down, allowing the King and Queen of New Mobotropolis some much needed alone time. Sonic and Sally spent a moment just relaxing by themselves for a couple of hours to let the whole thing sink in some more. It had been total bliss for them and both Mobians felt like they had gotten exactly what they'd needed. Now they came out of their rooms and met up with each other in the Grand Hallway. As they approached each other, Sonic noticed a long row of portraits all depicting past members of the Acorn Family on the walls.

Each picture depicted a king and queen from a different time period and some portraits were of any children that the kings and queens

from time long since gone had had. Sonic wondered if he'd end up on the wall one day, probably in a picture of himself and Sally next to the previous king and queen before them, Maximilian and Alicia Acorn. Would there be a portrait of their child too?

He came out of his thoughts as he and Sally embraced one another, looking as if they were relieved to be in each other's arms again.

"How'd it go Sonic?" the chipmunk asked.

"Swell." Sonic said casually, "The guys were very supportive of me and giving me advice and all. They're really nice like that." he smiled cheekily.

"That's great." Sally said, "Me and the girls had a good time together too. They were...a little over-enthusiastic about the news though." she murmured, looking a little uncomfortable just saying so.

"Can't say I'm that surprised." the king replied, trying not to sound rude, "But I'm sure they mean well, all our friends do." he added brightly.

"That is very true." Sally replied, "Anyway, the girls gave me a good idea on how we could help you get more comfortable with being a father Sonic. Cosmo told me that you talked to her and Tails about your parents one time and how they're still living. We thought maybe they could help you out there."

"Is that so?" Sonic said. He was so stunned at the sheer coincidence going on that he almost wanted to laugh. "How funny, I actually came to the same idea! I was planning on zooming over to Furville later today to say hi to them!"

Sally was so surprised, yet delighted that Sonic had thought of it already that she almost wanted to laugh too.

"Well...great minds really DO think alike!" she giggled, "Well I'm glad you thought of that too Sonic. When are you planning on leaving?"

"Well...sorta now-ish really." the hedgehog admitted, "I mostly came to see you to say bye before I left. Do you want me to stay with you and the baby..." he glanced down at Sally's belly for a brief moment as if acknowledging the baby for the first time, "...though? I could always juice another day instead."

"No dear, you can go now if you so wish." Sally said tenderly, "I'll be OK, I'll have Nicole look after me while you're gone."

"OK, if you say so." Sonic said, "I'll be gone for a few hours at most but I'll be back in time for dinner. See you later Sal."

He kissed his wife lovingly on the lips for a moment, wanting to make this brief farewell feel of something before he left. Once they separated, Sonic turned and zoomed down the hallway to run off to Furville. Sally could only stand and wave as her husband left. It looked as if things were looking up for her at last. Now she was alone again, Sally glanced down at her stomach and put a hand over it, smiling warmly.

"Your dad is going to be a great dad my child..." she whispered, "And I feel confident in saying that at this point."

Her hand still on her belly, Sally walked on down the hall to find something to do until her husband came back home...

It didn't take long for Sonic to reach Furville. With his supersonic speed and ability to go fast enough to break the sound barrier, it in fact NEVER took Sonic long to reach anywhere. He arrived at the small village in a matter of minutes, not even taking an hour to get there. Furville wasn't a large habitat but it was a very cosy looking place with some nice houses and a pleasantly placid atmosphere. The houses had stylized tiled roofs and concrete paths, giving it a rather vintage appearance. It looked very similair to Spagonia in terms of architecture.

Sonic slowed down to a walk and roamed through the streets of Furville, eyeing people walking around with children by their sides or carrying bags of groceries as they went about their daily lives. The king found himself smiling. What better place for his parents to live than right here in Furville? They couldn't have picked a more pleasant place to live. He was glad he had come without his crown and vest otherwise he'd have people raising a giant fuss about him. He wanted people to know him as Sonic the Hedgehog, not KING Sonic the Hedgehog. He noticed with satisfaction that a lot of people noticed him walking by. Some kids even pulled on their parent's hands and pointed, gleefully piping "Look mum! It's Sonic the Hedgehog!" or "Dad look, it's the Hero of Mobius!" Even some of the parents looked and waved, clearly delighted to see the world famous hero in their village. Sonic preferred that kind of attention. It made him feel more like himself as opposed to being called King Sonic like in New Mobotropolis.

Sonic carried on walking until he came across a bungalow with a red tiled roof and circular windows. There was a white picket fence that enclosed a beautiful front lawn and a neatly laid brick path leading to the door. Sonic noticed this with awe.

"Mom and dad, you always were fond of the traditional habitats." he chuckled.

He opened the gate and strode up the path to the front door. He could smell the fresh paint as he knocked on it. They must've not long since painted the door. Sonic stood by for a moment and waited until the door opened up. His mother, Bernadette the Hedgehog, was the one who answered it. He was looking a lot older now, some slight wrinkles on her face and streaks of silver lining her once perfectly blonde hair. She still looked rather fit and slender, clearly showing she was taking care of herself. Bernie's face lit up like a sunrise as she saw her own son standing before her, looking as handsome and carefree as ever.

"Yo mom, how's it hanging?" Sonic asked.

"Sonic! My little baby boy!" Bernie cried, throwing her arms around the king and embracing him tightly, "Oh my goodness it's been ages since you last visited! It's so good to see you!"

"Eh...thanks mom." Sonic said uneasily, "Mind gushing over me when I'm not in public view?" he added.

"Oh my, I'm so sorry!" Bernie giggled, blushing slightly, "I'm just so happy to see you I couldn't help myself! Please, come on in. Your father will be glad to see you too."

She let her son go and ushered him in quickly. Sonic didn't hesitate and walked straight in, his mother closing the door behind him. Sonic took in the sight of the rather simple but comfortable looking living room with its large sofa, wicker rug and soft carpeted floor. There was an old fashioned television standing near the sofa, not switched on at the moment. The house suddenly seemed so small and insignificant compared to the luxurious Castle Acorn Sonic now inhabited. But he could see that Bernie seemed perfectly fine living here so he didn't mind. He looked around but he saw no signs of his father.

"Where's dad?" he asked.

"He's in the kitchen fixing a chair." Bernie said, "I sat on it this morning and it collapsed! I always said to him it was getting old and needed looking at! Ha, ha...I'm sure he won't mind putting it aside for a minute though."

She ran over to a doorway and called out into the kitchen.

"Jules! Our son is here!" she hollered.

Sonic heard the sound of tools being put down on the table and footsteps in response to this. Jules the Hedgehog emerged from the kitchen and entered the living room, full of joy as he saw his beloved son standing before him. Jules was looking older too, his face more wrinkled and he was looking a little portly in comparison to how he

looked as a young man. But his age didn't seem to alter his enthusiasm at all as he ran over to Sonic and hugged him.

"My boy, it's such a delight to see you here!" he said jovially, "I've been looking forward to the next time you'd visit us."

"It's good to see you too pops." Sonic replied, "How's it going?"

Jules shrugged. "OK I s'pose." he said casually, "Not quite as fun when you're not here though. We always do love having you here Sonic."

"Thanks." the hedgehog said modestly, "Do you wanna know why I'm here?" he asked.

"We would dearest." Bernie said softly, "What reason do you have for coming to us today?"

Sonic guided his parents over to the sofa and the family all sat down as the hedgehog informed them quickly on the latest news that his wife was now pregnant and he would soon be a father. They knew all about Sonic's marriage to Sally of course and had been thrilled to attend the wedding when it had occurred. The two parents were dead silent for a few seconds after Sonic had finished. Their faces were full of joy upon hearing the news and were silent just to let it sink in for a moment.

"Oh Sonic...that's wonderful news!" Bernie gasped, tears of joy falling down her face, "My little boy...all grown up, married and soon to be a father!"

"We're so proud of you son." Jules said, his eyes also full of happy tears, "Congratulations."

"I knew you two would like that news." Sonic said, "Appreciate your joy by the way. But that's part of the reason why I came over here to see you two. You see...I'm a little nervous. I don't know anything about being a dad so I thought you two could give me some advice."

he explained, "You two know what it's like raising a child and being a parent. Could you give your son a few pointers?"

Jules and Bernie looked at each other as if trying to work out what the other was thinking. They both nodded, knowing very well that their son needed their help. Sonic had never been tutored on raising a child before. It was the least they could do to help Sonic raise their future grandson or granddaughter. Smiling, they looked back at Sonic, taking his hands into their own. Sonic smiled queasily as if that kind of attention was embarrassing to him but he didn't do anything about it.

"It would be our pleasure Sonic to help you become a father to your little prince or princess." Bernie insisted.

"When my little Bernie got pregnant with you son, my life felt as if it had been turned upside down." Jules chuckled, "It was like everything was changing for me, especially as it was so unexpected!"

"That's kinda how I feel now dad." Sonic nodded agreeably.

"I can imagine. You always did take a lot from me personality wise." the father explained, "Anyway, I got some advice from your grandfather on how to raise a child. Even my brother, your Uncle Chuck, gave me some pointers back when your mother was pregnant. They always told me that the best way to cope with being a father is to tell yourself how positive an impact the child will be for you and your wife. Don't ever act like your child will be a burden as that just makes the whole thing stressful."

"Your father's right dearest." Bernie said, stroking Sonic's hand, "And when the child is born, your top priority should be to raise your son or daughter in as positive a manner as possible. You must be firm but fair and teach them from right and wrong, educate them on the world around and always be protective of them. But you must also give them some level of freedom. It's not wise to over-protect your child and shelter them."

"Doing so can bring them up the wrong way." Jules added, "When me and Bernie were raising you Sonic, we did our best to give you the best we could. Same went to your late brother Scourge but I suppose we favoured you a little too much and...well you know how he turned out." he paused as if to collect himself before continuing, "Don't make the same mistake as us son. If you ever decide to have another kid, treat them both equally and they'll both turn out fine."

Sonic nodded, taking in everything he'd been told. There was definitely a lot to remember about raising children from being firm but fair to them, protecting them from the dangers of the world but to not over-protect them and let them have some room to grow on their own. It sounded like a lot of hard work in his eyes. He also didn't fancy the idea of having two children, fearing that he might end up getting his own Scourge.

"Thanks for that you two." he said, "But dad, I think I'll be fine with just one kid. I don't think I'd handle two kids!" he laughed.

"Whatever floats your boat my boy." Jules replied.

"So looking after a kid reburies discipline, patience, love and care right?" Sonic summarized, hoping he was right.

"Very much so." his mother confirmed, "Promise us Sonic that you'll be the best father you can to your child. Will you?"

"You have my word as King of New Mobotropolis mom." Sonic winked, "I'm gonna be the best dad my kid's ever gonna have! Well...I'm the only dad my kid's ever gonna have." he laughed.

Bernie and Jules chuckled with him and embraced their heroic offspring happily.

"We're so proud of you Sonic...you and Queen Sally." Jules said softly, "We wish you all the best for the future."

"We can't wait to see our grandchild." Bernie whispered, "You have all our love and thanks Sonic."

"Gee, thanks guys." Sonic said bashfully, "Don't know what I'd do without you two. Thank you both for your help and support."

The hedgehog could feel a warm, pleasant feeling inside as he and his parents cuddled together. They had definitely given him all the help he needed and now he felt more comfortable than ever that soon, he was going to be a father. He still had some doubts inside and was still a little nervous but he began to feel more confident and that he was going to be a good parent after all...

Nine Months Later…

Ever since his talk with his parents, Sonic had been growing less and less concerned about parenthood and had slowly but steadily come to accept the change in his life that would be with him forever. Sally had been pleased with his progress and how he had changed over the months that had been spent waiting for the big day itself. It had made her feel more comfortable with the fact she was going to have a baby now Sonic was more accepting of the idea and other the past nine months, they had spent a few hours together on many days discussing all the fun their baby was going to be and planning for the baby's arrival. Gifts had been donated to provide for the new-born and the King and Queen, with some help from Nicole, had managed to redecorate one of the spare rooms in Castle Acorn into a little play area for the child to entertain itself. They had even built a cot for the baby to sleep in, though Sonic had been a bit hopeless in the construction process given his lack of adequate construction skills. Sally still laughed whenever she remembered the many times Sonic had accidentally hurt his fingers when trying to help. It had gotten so bad that Sally had just ended up asking Tails to finish it off.

Throughout the period, Sonic had still been seeing his parents and updating them about how things were going and informing them about how long it was estimated they had left until the baby arrived.

He had also been practicing a few times on how to raise children by answering questions his parents would ask him. As time went on, Sonic's answers had become more and more noble and reasonable, which in turn had added to his growing confidence.

And now all the preparations were ready to pay off. It was April the 6th, 2145. Nine months and six days had passed since the day Sally had announced she was pregnant and as of this moment, she was quickly being whisked off to the New Mobotropolis Hospital by Sonic himself. The queen was going into labour and Sonic was finding himself all full of panic. Nine months of preparing for this moment hadn't lessened the impact at all. When Sally had mentioned the baby was coming, the first thing Sonic had done was freak out. God, not even a year's worth of preparations could've prepared him for this!

Sonic arrived at the hospital, relieved to have made it in time. What a day this would've been if Sally had given birth in the middle of the entire city! Upon entering, Sonic quickly informed the medical staff that Sally was going into labour and needed somebody right away. Everything seemed to be in a blur as he and the queen were soon whisked down the hallway and into a room where Sally would finally give birth. Sonic put his wife down on the bed as a team of doctors and nurses all gathered around her. The one expected to receive the baby was a young nurse named Dr. Sonar "Breezy" the Hedgehog. Sonar had been part of the medical staff ever since the famed Mariah the Medicine Cat had been murdered by Mecha Tails during the war against the Dark Armada in 2143. She had proven to be exceptionally potent at what she did with her magical healing abilities that she mostly used in extreme cases. Sonar was an exceptionally attractive brown furred hedgehog with large ears, almost like a bat's, with long quills and emerald green eyes. She dressed quite casually for a nurse, wearing a blue and white sports bra and shorts, sporty trainers and a green satchel slung over her shoulder. She had a white belt with a red cross on it, the only thing about her appearance even remotely suggesting "medical person".

Right now she had put on a long white coat as she examined her patient. Sally panted, trying her best to keep calm as the pain surged through her body. She had never felt so much pain before. Sonic held her hand for extra comfort, his heart skipping so fast he no longer registered the individual beats.

"How long has she been in labour?" Sonar asked.

"Just a few minutes." Sonic confirmed, "The moment she told me the baby was coming, I ran over here straight away! Is she gonna be OK?" he asked.

Sonic knew that giving birth was a very tough time for a woman and that some women had even died from childbirth. It was why he was a nervous wreck at this moment. Would Sally die bringing her own child to life?

"She's quite stable, I'm sure her majesty's going to make it my king." Sonar said, "But we'll have to work now. My queen, are you ready?" she asked.

"R-ready…" Sally winced, her face contorting with agony.

She let out a small wail as the pain kicked in again. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead as she panted. Sonic grew more and more anxious for his beloved, hoping that this would be over soon and Sally would no longer be in pain. The other doctors watched as Sonar got herself into position, ready to receive the baby. She was sweating herself. She hadn't been a nurse for long, only about a year and had just climbed up the ranks. For Sonar, this pregnancy delivery was her first ever and she was incredibly nervous. All her medical training as about to pay off, and with the birth of the queen's child no less!

"Hope all goes well…" Sonar whispered to herself.

Sally looked over at Sonic, still panting heavily. She looked very uncomfortable, her eyes looking exhausted and her hair very untidy.

Sonic could see that she was in pain and tried his best to soothe her. He squeezed her hand so tightly that he looked like he was going to wrench it off. Sally then tensed up, wailing in anguish as she pushed. Her screams were light a knife through Sonic's heart. How much agony it must feel for her! That was all he thought as Sally pushed. Nothing happened at first. Sonic began to feel more nervous. Would Sally have a lot of trouble during the birth and end up in more agony? He dreaded to find out as Sally prepared to give it another go. Every minute was feeling like an eternity for the couple, when would it be over?!

Sally took some deep breaths, silently counting to three in her head. Then she had another push, crying out loudly as she tried again. The pain was excruciating, she felt like she was about to pass out. Sonic felt as if he wanted to pass out with her, squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth as the screams tore through him. Sally let out one last scream of anguish and then…she lay back in the bed and gasped for breath. What followed next was the sound of…a baby's cries.

Both king and queen opened their eyes again, sighting what was to be the most wonderful sight of their entire lives. In Sonar's hands lay a beautiful baby hedgehog with orange fur and blue quill tips. The baby wailed, its life now finally beginning outside of its mother's womb. Sonic and Sally's eyes were both filled with awe as they took in the sight. They'd done it, their baby was finally here. Sally then began to cry, tears of joy raining down her face. She was a mother at last!

"Oh my gosh…my baby! My beautiful baby…" she whispered.

"It's beautiful Sal…" Sonic concurred, "A little bundle of joy…"

He began to cry himself too. This was by far the biggest, yet sweetest moment of his entire life. He wanted to savour this moment forever.

"Congratulations my queen!" Sonar said, clearly relieved herself that this had all gone well, "You've given birth to a healthy baby girl."

She looked down at the infant, which was still wailing but its wails were beginning to get quieter.

"It's a girl?" Sonic blurted, "You mean…we've got ourselves a princess?"

"You certainly have my king." Sonar said softly, "New Mobotropolis now has a princess again." she winked at Sally, knowing full well that she had been the princess before the new-born child.

"Please can I see my baby?" Sally asked.

"Of course, here you go." the nurse said, walking over to Sally and holding the infant out to her.

Sally gently took the baby from Sonar's hands and laid her against her chest. Sonar also gave Sally a blanket to wrap the baby up in. The baby was making a few sounds as if discovering what it could do and seeing how far its vocabulary could go. It had stopped crying for now and was snuggling against her mother's chest. She placed her tiny hands against Sally's heart, making the queen smile with joy. The infant hedgehog's eyes were still closed but they would soon open. Sally slowly stroked the infant's quills, her warm tears still trickling down her face. Sonic leant forward and smiled at his daughter. What a perfect little princess she was to him.

"She's gorgeous…" Sonic said softly, "Such a beautiful little gal. Just like you Sal."

"I know…" Sally whispered, "Oh Sonic…I've never been so happy in my life!"

"This could be the best day of our lives." the king replied.

Both parents looked down as their new-born daughter began to coo a little. She was still nuzzling against her mother as if reassuring herself that this woman was her mother. And then, at long last, the baby's eyes suddenly opened. Slowly, the infant looked up, everything a blur at first to its opening eyes. Sonic and Sally could see that the eyes pools of beautiful green staring up at them inquisitively. Sally awed and began to softly stroke the baby's cheek.

"Aw look…she's got your eyes Sonic!" she whispered.

"Hello there little girl!" Sonic cooed gently to the baby.

The little hedgehog looked into her father's eyes, taking in what it was seeing. Then, the baby suddenly reached out and ever so lightly, touched Sonic's nose. The king grinned from ear to ear, a warm sensation spreading from his head down to his toes. Could this scene possibly get any cuter? In response, he gently took a hold of his daughter's tiny hand. He would be the best father this little child could ever ask for.

"What are we gonna call her?" Sonic asked, still beaming with awe.

"Well…I quite like the name Zoe." Sally responded, "I've always wanted to name my own daughter Zoe."

"I thought "Zoom" would be nice." the king mused, "Name would sound similar to mine you know?"

Sally thought for a moment, cradling her baby gently in her arms.

"How about Zoe is her first name and Zoom can be her nickname?" she asked.

"I think that's a great idea." the hedgehog replied.

Both parents looked down at their beautiful baby daughter again, awed by how tightly snuggled up against her mother's chest she

was. She looked as if she was falling asleep, taking its first yawn of its life.

"Welcome to the world Zoe…" both Sonic and Sally said to the infant…

Awwww, how sweet! Sonic and Sally have got themselves a daughter! ^^

So what will become of them now that they have a child to raise? Tune in next time as we now enter "15 Years Later"...

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Many thanks to both DarkMegaFan01 and Sonar15 for allowing me to use these characters. :)

Rising Evil: Chapter 2: 15 Years Later

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 2: Fifteen Years Later

A few days had gone by for Sonic and Sally. To them, it felt as if time had passed very quickly and that they could barely keep up. Most of the days that had passed since the big day had been spent settling in with their newborn daughter and relaxing from the stress that they had endured throughout the birth. They hadn't bothered to keep Zoe's birth a secret since it would've just got out anyway and were quick to announce that their little princess had been born.

In order to give the baby time to settle, they had requested no visitors for a few days as they felt it would be easier for Zoe if she was used to her surroundings first before anybody came to see her. So once they had been released from hospital, the hedgehog and chipmunk had quickly brought their daughter home and settled her down in her bedroom, which had been prepared months beforehand. Zoe had spent most of her time just sleeping peacefully in her cot or crying for one reason or another. This had made Sonic feel uncomfortable for one of the many things he had dreaded about raising a child was dealing with their crying over and over. But he remembered what his parents had taught him and forced himself to be patient. It wouldn't be fair to get annoyed at his darling daughter at this age, she was only a baby. Sally had been spending the most time with Zoe in their short time together without anybody else to see them and had coped rather well with the fact she was now a mother. Sonic had joked that it was like Sally had already been a mother beforehand whereas Sally just retorted to him about how she'd been given lessons from her late mother to prepare her for this.

Today was a warm Spring day, as expected from a day in April on Mobius. The sun was out, a dazzling ball of yellow light in the cloudless blue sky and to make the most of this beautiful day, the

King and Queen had decided to sit outside in the castle gardens with Zoe snoozing contently in a carrier basket. It was the first time since her birth that she had been brought outside. Sally gently rocked the basket back and forth by pushing down on it with her foot, smiling at the child with awe.

"She's so cute when she's asleep..." she said softly.

"And quiet too." Sonic snickered.

Sally smirked at Sonic in response but her expression was clearly one of humour more than anything. She liked to play along with Sonic's jokes at times.

"So what do you think she'll become when she grows up Sal?" Sonic suddenly asked.

It was something that had been on his mind and he felt that now was a good time to ask about it. Sally put a finger to her lips in thought, pondering the question.

"You know...that's a good question Sonic." she said, "I hope I can think of a good answer for that."

"That's cool." the king said casually, "As for me, I wonder if she'll be like us y'know? She could be a part of the R.F.S. and fight alongside us as we keep the peace on Mobius. We'd be like a family of heroes the three of us!" he exclaimed enthusiastically.

The thought brought a smile to Sally's face. It was a very lovely thought indeed.

"I like that idea." she said, "Zoe could be like the next big hero of Mobius after you Sonic. We could train her as she grows up and teach her the ways of heroism and how to fight crime."

"With us as her tutors, she'll be every bit the hero I am!" Sonic declared, "Heck, she might even be worthy of succeeding me!"

"Not if she becomes as big-headed as you Sonic." Sally snorted teasingly, shoving her husband, "If she gets an ego as big as yours, you're on your own in raising her!"

"Ha, ha! Fair enough Sal!" Sonic chuckled, shoving Sally back playfully.

Then suddenly, their playful teasing was interrupted by the appearance of Nicole the Holo-Lynx. She materialized into view and bowed to her superiors. A year and a few months had passed since the fall of Enerjak and she looked no different to how she did back then, not even a change in her avatar's appearance.

"Good morning your majesties." she said humbly.

"Nicole, how many times do we have to tell you, you can just call us Sonic and Sally!" Sonic cried humorously.

"I'm only being polite my king..." Nicole muttered, "Anyway you two, you have some visitors here to see Princess Zoe." she announced, "I let our friends know that you're accepting visits now and Tails and Cosmo are the first ones here to see her."

"Have you told them we're in the garden?" Sally asked.

"I have, they're coming around now." Nicole replied.

Right on cue, the fox kit and the Seedrian child, who were now close to teenagers, arrived in the garden to see their friends. Tails waved gleefully over at Sonic and ran over to him. Cosmo followed him and both children exchanged hugs with the royal couple.

"Hi Sonic, Hi Sally!" Tails said brightly.

"How are you doing today your graces?" Cosmo asked politely.

"We're fine thank you sweetheart." Sally replied, patting the alien plant girl on the head.

"Just shooting the breeze right about now big guy." Sonic said, "Us and our new kid."

"Oh yes, that's what we came over for!" Tails exclaimed, "How's the baby?"

"Sleeping." said Sally, "So if you please, can you be as quiet as possible while you're here?"

Both children nodded, deciding to lower their voices a touch so as not to disturb Zoe.

"Please can we see her?" Cosmo asked eagerly.

"She's in the basket." Sonic said, turning it around so that the two could see her, "Here is our little Princess Zoe Tails and Cosmo."

The infant hedgehog was still snoozing peacefully in the basket, the hood opened out to keep the sun out of her eyes so she could sleep. Tails and Cosmo knelt down in front of the basket and peered in at the little hedgehog. Their faces gleamed with awe at the sight of the child. Zoe was one of the cutest things that they had ever seen in their eyes.

"Awwwwwwwwwww!" Tails cried, trying not to be too loud, "Look at her!"

"She's adorable. What a cute little baby!" Cosmo beamed.

"Thank you so much you two." Sally said graciously, "We're glad you think that."

"Yeah, just wait until she starts crying though. Then she won't look so cute." Sonic snickered.

"Sonic, that's no way to talk about your own daughter!" Tails exclaimed humorously.

Sonic just laughed in response and ruffled the fur on his little brother figure's head playfully.

"Only kidding Tails, don't take it so seriously! That's Shadow's job!" he teased.

Tails laughed and playfully pushed Sonic back, making him laugh in return.

"In all due serious though little bro, I absolutely love her." the king admitted, "Zoe's the most precious thing I've ever gotten since I married Sally. We're really happy to have her." he added, smiling tenderly at his sleeping daughter.

"That's really sweet." Cosmo said joyfully, "I'm glad you two are happy to have her."

She turned to face the infant, who was still peacefully snoozing in the basket. Zoe hadn't moved for a long time but now she was beginning to twitch slightly. Was she about to wake up? Cosmo watched as Zoe began to move and then she turned onto her side as if trying to make herself comfortable. She didn't open her eyes. The princess was still asleep. Smiling with awe, Cosmo began to rock the basket back and forth gently. She also began to sing a lullaby to Zoe to accompany the rocking. Her singing voice was one of the most pleasant voices that Sonic, Sally and especially Tails had ever heard.

Rock-a-bye baby, on the treetops. When the wind blows, the cradle will rock... she sang.

Zoe gave another twitch in her sleep but she seemed to acknowledge that somebody was singing to her. Her ears were twitching in response as Cosmo sang to her. And as the little Seedrian sang, she became more still and relaxed, as if the song was helping her sleep some more. Sonic and Sally both smiled appreciatively at Cosmo.

"Awwww, that's sweet of you Cosmo." Sally said, touched by the Seedrian's kindness, "I bet Zoe really likes that."

"I'm sure any baby would love to hear Cosmo's angelic singing voice." Tails concurred.

The Seedrian blushed with pleasure, still rocking the basket. She loved it when Tails said nice things like that to her.

"You know, when Zoe grows up...do you think she'll become like you two?" Cosmo asked curiously.

"We were wondering that ourselves." Sally admitted, "We plan to train her to become a Royal Fighter like us when she's older."

"That'll be swell!" Tails exclaimed, "She could be the start of say, a new generation of Royal Fighters to take over from us when...you know..." he paused, not quite willing to say the terrible words, "She could be like, the new Sonic or something."

"Depends if she can run fast like me." Sonic noted, "But you can bet I'll be teaching her to spin-dash and all that jazz. It's something I'm actually kinda excited about just thinking about it!" he added, smiling childishly.

"I'll also be teaching her sword play and martial arts." Sally declared, "And how to run a city too. Zoe is the new princess after all and soon she'll have to succeed me as queen." she added, glumly acknowledging that some time in the future, her time on the throne would be over and she'd be reuniting with her deceased parents.

"Yeah, she will." Tails agreed, "But she won't have to worry about that stuff now. She can just live carefree for the first few years of her life."

"As does any other baby." Cosmo agreed, "When she grows up though, I'm sure she'll achieve many great things...just like you two." she added, smiling sweetly at Sonic and Sally.

"That's very kind of you to say kiddo." Sonic said, flattered, "And I agree. Zoe's gonna be a great kid and me and Sally will be beside her as long as she needs us."

He looked over at the beautiful, sleeping baby in the carrier basket. Little did Zoe know that she would be living a life as extraordinary as he himself was living. Once she was able to walk, her life would truly begin, and in a way bigger than any other child on Mobius...

Four Years Later...

Princess Zoe was now a toddler and was just coming to grips with learning how to walk and talk. As she had been growing though, her personality had been developing. To Sonic's delight, she was shaping up to be a very cheerful, precocious child with a very fun-loving streak and some rather keen interests. She was beginning to learn how to read and took more interest in books as time went by. Sally often took her into the castle library to read a book, though the princess didn't get much choice on what to read since the castle library's books were not really aimed at kids. Despite being four years old, Zoe was showing signs that she was learning to read quite well. She could small sentences but struggled with bigger sentences and was still learning how to properly pronounce certain words. But the child's interest in books had pleased Sally greatly. She was a bookworm herself and was proud to see her daughter carrying this trait. Zoe had also picked up a few words but found herself often repeating the same words she had learnt over and over.

As Zoe had been growing, Sonic had noticed something unusual about her. When she was two, she had been crawling a lot faster than the average baby usually did crawl. It was almost like she was trying to run on all fours. Sonic took this is a sign that she was displaying traits of his supersonic speed. As she had been learning to walk, she hadn't been displaying much speed for she was still finding her feet. But Sonic had been greatly helpful in teaching her how to walk and keep herself steady. Zoe seemed to think this was a big game for her for every time Sonic taught her how to walk, she

had giggled merrily as if every step she took was somehow funny to her. Sonic had often found himself laughing with her but both father and daughter laughed the hardest when Zoe fell over in her practices. Sonic had been on hand to make sure his daughter never hurt herself when she fell over every time.

Over time, Zoe had been introduced to all the Royal Fighters and had been adored by all of them. She had even had a go at saying their names as Sonic and Sally introduced them to her but she couldn't quite pronounce everybody's names correctly yet. She could say Tails, Cosmo, Amy and Cream's names OK and could say Bunnie and Nicole's names with ease but for the rest, she still had trouble, often said "Wislow" instead of "Wilson" or "Mamdy" instead of Mandy. The toddler had even had trouble pronouncing Ruben and Sora's names right. She had made Team Chaotix laugh out loud by pronouncing their names comically wrong, saying "Hector, Epsio and Harmy" when asked to say their names.

At four years old, Zoe was dressed in blue overalls worn over a red t-shirt, white gloves and small trainers. Her overalls had a center pocket with a gold ring proudly displaying the acorn emblem in the centre. The child was already showing signs that she was going to be a bright young girl with many instances of showing great intelligence and her slow but steady pace in learning how to read well. This had delighted the king and queen for it meant that she would be easier to teach when the time was right. They even wondered if now was a good time to introduce her to the R.F.S.

So as of now, they were showing Zoe around Royal HQ. Sonic had the infant in his arms as he showed her what was in the headquarters of the R.F.S. He showed her every room from the rec room to the laboratory. Zoe had been inquisitively ingesting the amazing sights and cooing with delight. She even pointed and babbled semi-intelligibly at what she saw.

"Look! Big computer!" she cried as she pointed at a computer in the lab. Most of her vocabulary consisted of speaking in sentence fragments.

"Yes Zoe, that's a very big computer." Sonic said brightly, "That computer is where Nicole lives Zoe."

"Nicole lives in computer?" Zoe asked quizzically.

This had prompted Nicole to show herself up on the computer screen, her beautiful face lit up with a bright smile of delight upon seeing how the visitors were. She had watched Zoe grow over the past four years and was pleased to see her having her first visit to Royal HQ.

"Hello Sonic, hello Zoe." Nicole said brightly.

"Hi Nicole!" Zoe exclaimed happily.

"I think she's happy to see you Nicole." Sonic chuckled.

"I think the smile on her face is a big enough hint." the digital Mobian retorted, smirking.

"Is computer house nice place to live?" Zoe asked.

This had caused Sonic and Nicole to burst out laughing. Later on, Sonic had finished showing Zoe around and now the king was taking her to see the training grounds. The training grounds were where any recruits on the R.F.S. would train to keep themselves in shape and prepare themselves for any possible battles. There maybe peace on Mobius but even peaceful worlds have to remain vigilant for the possibility of war. That was what caused the evil Martians to become anti-pacifists and had led to their demise here on Mobius many years ago. They had been too pacifistic and thus when an invasion had happened, they had nearly been wiped out. Mobius would not make the same mistake that Mars had made a million years ago.

As Sonic arrived at the training grounds with Zoe in a pushchair, he noticed that many of the soldiers were practicing loading their guns. It was compulsory to learn how to load your gun quickly when you

run out of ammo on the battlefield. Sonic watched, almost mesmerized at how quickly the trainees were switching cartridges. There was a sergeant who was keeping charge and he seemed impressed with how well his new students were doing. He barked out orders and shouted compliments as the session went on. Sonic decided to keep Zoe out of the way for accidents could happen at stages like these. He also had a heavy dislike for guns himself and didn't want Zoe to try playing with them. He parked the pushchair outside the training grounds and walked in to greet the sergeant. As he left though, he didn't beckon on Zoe being so intelligent that she had worked out how to get out of her pushchair. Zoe called desperately for Sonic but when he didn't answer her or even stop to look at her, the young child decided to follow him. She undid the buckle on her pushchair and climbed down from it.

Free from her pushchair, she then began to toddle over to the entrance gate to the training ground to see what her father was doing. Inside the arena, the sergeant had ordered the soldiers to cease activity and to bow in respect for their king. Sonic just modestly told them not to and to rise up again. The sergeant saluted Sonic. He was a middle-aged grey wolf who had been promoted to the rank of sergeant a few years ago and he took his job with the utmost seriousness. He was also fond of shouting, even when he was just standing face to face with somebody.

"Greetings your majesty!" the sergeant barked.

"Balto please, you don't have to salute me." Sonic said uneasily, "And for crying out loud, speak quieter! I'm only right in front of you for goodness sake!"

"My apologies, I often get carried away in my duties..." Balto said sheepishly, "So what brings you here then?"

"I'm showing my daughter the training grounds." Sonic announced, "She's gotta learn every inch of the R.F.S. after all. Mind putting the guns away for a minute? I don't want any accidents to occur ya know?"

"Understood." the wolf nodded, "Soldiers! All weaponry is to be stored away while the king brings the princess in for a look around!" he bellowed.

The soldiers nodded and they all began marching off to put away their weapons. As Sonic and Balto began to talk some more though, Zoe toddled up towards him, a big smile on her face.

"D-d-daddy!" she called brightly.

Her cries were so sudden that one of the soldiers jumped in alarm. He turned to see where the voice had come from and got a nasty surprise for he saw the infant Zoe staggering across the grounds to Sonic and Balto.

"S-sergeant!" he cried, jumping back in disbelief "There's a kid in here!"

As the soldier jumped, he accidentally bumped into one of his comrades, knocking him over onto his face. The soldier still had his rifle in his hands and as he hit the ground, his finger suddenly tightened on the trigger. A loud bang split the air and Zoe, who just happened to be in the way of the firing rifle, fell over onto her side, screeching in agony. Sonic and Balto had watched the horrific accident in horror and Balto ended up putting his hands to his mouth in shock, completely losing his composure. He knew who the child was and he was horrified to see that she had been shot. Sonic's face was the true mask of horror as he knelt down beside his injured daughter. Zoe had been hit in the arm by the rifle and she was bleeding heavily. Her whole arm was soaked in blood already and she was crying loudly. Her wails made Sonic feel like he was being torn apart from the inside.

"OH MY GOD, ZOE!" Sonic shrieked, putting a hand on his beloved child fearfully.

"WHAT IN THE BLAZES HAPPENED?!" Balto snarled.

"I'm v-v-very s-sorry sir!" the soldier who had caused the freak accident stammered, "I saw the kid and I jumped in surprise, then I accidentally knocked Ben over and caused him to shoot her!"

"Well thank goodness it hadn't been done intentionally." the sergeant muttered, "Training is over, you're all dismissed!" he barked.

The soldiers nodded and quickly left the area, keen to get away from the terrible scene as fast as possible. As for Sonic, he had taken his glove off and was using it to dab at Zoe's wound. The poor toddler was still wailing in anguish, trembling from the shock of being hurt, and wincing in pain.

"Daddy, it hurts! M-m-my arm h-h-hurts! And th-that b-b-big n-noise was s-scary!" she sobbed.

"Ssh, ssh, ssh, it's OK Zoe, don't cry. Daddy's here." Sonic insisted, trying to calm her down, "Why did you get out of your pushchair Zoe? You was supposed to wait for me!" he suddenly exclaimed. His eyes were trickling with tears of horror as he spoke and he was fighting hard to keep himself under control. But his emotions were getting the better of him.

"I w-w-wanted t-to s-see w-w-what you doing!" Zoe whimpered, "I sorry d-daddy!"

Sonic just picked up his injured daughter and patted her softly on the back. How could he get so mad at Zoe when she was in so much pain right now? He felt ashamed of himself and decided to fix this immediately. He turned to Balto.

"I'm taking Zoe to hospital." he said, "Whatever happens, just understand that you're not at fault Balto. Do NOT blame yourself for this...please. It wasn't your fault."

"I understand my king." Balto said, saluting, "I'm terribly sorry that this accident has happened. We didn't think the princess would just wonder in like that."

"I didn't either..." Sonic murmured, "She's too clever for her own good..."

With nothing more to say, Sonic quickly zoomed out of the training grounds, still pressing his glove onto Zoe's wound, and he quickly headed off to hospital. He was never taking Zoe near that place again! He never wanted Zoe to get hurt by a gun and yet the first time she was brought here, that was exactly what had happened! Sonic felt ashamed and angry at himself. Why had he been so stupid?! Why had he brought his infant daughter to such a dangerous place?! Well never again. He was going to be a good father from now on and never ever let anything happen to Zoe again...

A few hours later, Zoe's arm had been bandaged up and she was lying in a hospital bed, sleeping contently without any troubles. Dr. Sonar had been the one to look after Zoe once Sonic had arrived at the hospital with her. She had carefully removed the bullet from Zoe's arm and given her antibiotics to make sure the wound wouldn't get infected. Zoe had lost blood, but not enough to be considered serious. She still needed to have a long, long rest so the wound could repair and the blood lost could restore itself. Sally had been quickly informed on what had happened and had rushed over to the hospital. Upon seeing Zoe in this state, she had nearly fainted. She was too shocked to do so and had instead just broken down crying. Sonic quickly put an arm around his wife as she began crying.

"M-m-my baby!" she sobbed, "M-m-my p-p-poor baby!"

"It's OK Sal...it's OK..." Sonic insisted, "Sonar's taken good care of her. She's going to be fine."

He turned over to Sonar, who was writing in a medical report for Zoe.

"So what's the prognosis then?" he asked.

"Well thankfully, the bullet didn't hit any major arteries." the nurse replied, "It had just embedded itself in the flesh. But because Zoe's so young, it was far more terrible to her than it would've been for an adult. She is frankly very lucky that the bullet only hit her in the arm and not anywhere important. Alas though, I think Zoe's wound will never fully heal. She might have a scar for the rest of her life and she might get pains in her arm from time to time. Thus she may not be adequate for certain exercises and sports involving the arms."

"Will she be alright though?" Sally whimpered, trying to control her tears.

"She will live my queen. Your daughter will be fine." Sonar said tenderly, "But please you two, be careful with her. We don't know how delicate her arm maybe in the future."

"You don't have to tell me twice Dr. Sonar." Sonic muttered.

He looked over at Zoe, who was looking very peaceful and content now the whole thing had come to pass. He felt relieved. Zoe could now rest from her pain and she wouldn't be crying anymore. He still felt very guilty for what had happened though. He shouldn't have taken Zoe to the training grounds! He could feel the tears coming to his eyes again as the grief came over him.

"Oh Sally...I'm s-so s-sorry this h-happened..." he stammered, "I d-d-didn't expect her to escape f-f-from her pushchair and..."

"Sonic honey, please don't fret. It wasn't your fault." Sally said softly, "It was a freak accident that nobody could've predicted..."

"But I could've prevented it!" Sonic wailed, "I should've stayed away from the training grounds, I shouldn't have brought her! Why did I do something so stupid?! WHY?!"

"Because you wanted to show her the R.F.S. as a whole Sonic. We both agreed we'd have to introduce her to our world eventually..."

Sally noted, "But maybe we were too early. We probably should've waited another year or two first."

"Maybe...but I can assure you that this'll never happen again Sally." Sonic declared.

He then reached out and gently touched his daughter's face.

"I'm gonna take good care you Zoe...I promise." he swore, "I'm gonna protect you as much as I possibly can and never let anything like this happen again. I promise Zoe..."

He then leaned forward and kissed Zoe gently on the forehead, careful not to wake her. He had made the promise and for his daughter's sake, he was determined to keep it...

Eleven Years Later...

As time had passed, things had changed heavily for Sonic and friends. Many of them had grown accustomed to living by themselves and getting more used to domestic life and some were even starting families. Thus the Royal Fighters of New Mobotropolis had become less like a team over time and more like a band that had departed to go their own ways until it was time to come back together again. Everybody was still in contact with one another but the Mobians spent more times by themselves or with their families nowadays.

Sonic was one of them, spending most of his time with his family nowadays. And he had kept the promise he had made to Zoe in the hospital that day. Some might even say he had kept it TOO well. Ever since the terrible accident that had seen Zoe shot in the arm, Sonic had been keeping close tabs on Zoe at all times, consistently worried that she would get hurt again. He never even let Zoe go out by herself if he could help it. It was as if his daughter had a magnet and it was constantly attracting him and she couldn't shake him off no matter what. He knew that his parents had told him about this

when they had given him advice on how to raise a child but Sonic didn't care at this point. All he cared was that his precious Zoe was well looked after, safe and unlikely to ever get injured again. Sally hadn't been as over-protective, knowing that over-protection was not the right way to raise up a child. While she looked after Zoe well, she allowed her daughter considerably more freedom than Sonic did. This had caused Zoe to prefer her mother over her father over the past eleven years.

For Zoe, the eleven years that had followed from her accident had seen her kept tightly under Sonic's wing but not to the point she had received no training. Sonic knew full well that as protective as he was being to her, he still needed to teach Zoe how to fight. There would be a time where he wouldn't be around to protect her and if Zoe didn't receive any training, she'd be utterly helpless in a fight or a struggle. The training matches were the most fun Zoe had ever had with Sonic these days. Under his teachings, she had learned many of the skills that Sonic possessed himself. She could now spin-dash, run at super sonic speeds and even homing attack. The training had been rough and Zoe had received many bruises from many sessions but she was learning well, much to Sonic's delight. Zoe had first discovered her talent for great speed at the age of 6. She had tried running and had ended up going faster than she had been expected to run. Sonic had of course been delighted and surprised at this and was quick to teach her how to control her speed and how to use her reflexes. The princess had taken all of her father's information to heart and at fifteen years old, she was on par with Sonic. Sonic had mastered his speed at age fifteen too.

With Sally, Zoe had been taught martial arts and sword play. Tails had invented some blade emitters for Zoe as he had done for Sally years ago and Sally had taught Zoe how to use them with great efficiency. Sonic had objected, fearing Zoe would injure herself, but for once, Sally had dug her heels in and ignored him. During the training, the queen had noticed that her daughter seemed to wince a lot when using her right arm. Sonar had warned them her arm might still hurt on occasion but as the training continued, Zoe seemed to

hurt less and less in her arm. There were even times when they clashed laser blades and Zoe never once winced in pain although when asked about it, she had admitted she does still feel pain when she uses her right arm a lot. The training had just gotten her used to the pain, something that Sally thought would be very useful for her in battle. As well as fighting skills, Sally had been teaching Zoe plenty on diplomacy and how to run the city. Zoe had been bored by the lessons but knew she had to attend them since she would be a queen some day and would need such skills for when the time arrived.

Today, it had been a week since Zoe had turned fifteen and she had grown up into a beautiful young teenager. Her quills had grown and her body had become rather slender and curvaceous, making her look very similar to her mother in build. Three of her quills were styled in a fringe above her head that greatly resembled Sally's own hair style. She also wore rather skimpy clothing, something that Sonic had questioned but had been told not to argue with her about since it was her choice on what she wore. Zoe dressed in a blue tank top that exposed her belly, brown shorts and red shoes with silver stars on them. She also wore red finger-less gloves and around her wrists, she wore the blade emitters that Tails had given her. Zoe liked the idea of having a weapon on her as it made her feel strong and prepared.

As she'd grown older, Zoe had grown a new personality that had more than replaced her original one. She was very similar into personality to Sonic, being good-hearted and noble but also possessing his bad temper. She lacked his ego due to thinking that egotism was a terrible trait to have and was very competitive. Even when Sally trained her, she had a habit of getting too carried away and forgetting to sit back and relax for a moment. She also took losing very badly, especially when it was Sonic who beat her.

As of this moment, she was taking up one of her more relaxing hobbies. Zoe had been given an acoustic guitar for her birthday when she was ten and had been learning to play it for the past five

years. She could play reasonably well and was now sitting in the park strumming a few tunes to herself. This was one of the few times she ever had her own freedom and didn't have to put up with Sonic being too protective of her. She strummed a tune on the guitar, seeing if she could attach any lyrics to it. She hummed along as she played.

" *Dum, dum...da, dum..* ." she mused, " *I see it, I see it, and now it's all within my reach. Endless Possibility. I see it, I see it now, it's always been inside of me. And now I feel so free...Endless Possibility...* "

Zoe paused for a moment as she considered what she'd just sung.

"Hmmm...that wouldn't be a bad song really." she said brightly, "Endless Possibility would be a good name for it. If only I felt as free as what I just sung though..."

She sighed as she continued to strum. Hopefully someday, Sonic would ease off and give her more freedom to do what she wanted. She didn't want to spend the rest of her life feeling as if the city she was soon destined to be queen of was a metropolis-sized prison for her. Zoe had heard many tales about her father's amazing adventures and travels around the world. She was fifteen now and she'd never been outside the city by herself! She'd only ever seen Green Hill Zone and even then, she had a feeling Sonic only took her there because it was "safe" and "nonhazardous" to her. Zoe tried to put her thoughts out of her mind as she continued playing.

" *I see it, I see it, and now it's all within my reach. Endless Possibility. I see it, I see it now, it's always been inside of me. And now I feel so free...Endless Possibility...* " she sung again. The lyrics were really beginning to weave themselves now and with any luck, she'd have a whole song of her own to sing. Or maybe even a song that the famous Mina Mongoose or Sandy the Ferret could perform at a concert.

"Hey Zoom, that's some good playing there." came a voice that she hadn't expected to hear.

Zoe jumped and turned around, sighing exasperatedly as she saw who it was. It was Sonic once again. Damn it, couldn't the overbaring fool leave her alone for two minutes?! Two hours even!

"Oh...it's you dad." she sighed.

"Hey Zoom, don't talk to your father like that!" Sonic snapped, "I only said how good your guitar skills are."

"Don't call me "Zoom" dad!" Zoe retorted, "I hate that nickname! Stop calling me it!"

"Why? Zoom's a great nickname!" Sonic protested.

"Zoom is a comic book character's name! A really cheesy, outdated comic book character!" Zoe grumbled, "Seriously dad, I'm not some corny superhero you know so call me by my real name!"

Sonic rolled his eyes in annoyance. Zoe had become awfully mouthy with him as she'd been getting older. Sally blamed the usual teenage hormones but Sonic had a feeling it was something else entirely. Did Zoe hate him? He couldn't bear to think if she did hate him. Hoping to save himself, he quickly changed the subject.

"So, you're getting quite good at the guitar kiddo." Sonic complimented, "That was a nice tune you were playing."

"Thanks." Zoe said nonchalantly, "I suppose you was spying on me for so long you heard it all?"

"Actually, when you're done being cheeky, I just happened to be passing." Sonic snapped, "I was just going over to see how Tails and Cosmo are doing and I heard you playing. I got curious and then decided to see what you were playing."

Zoe raised an eyebrow, suspecting her dad was lying. She knew him all too well to know that he was often not just "passing by" when he came across her. But Sonic had sounded pretty genuine this time so maybe for once, he meant what he had said. Softening up, Zoe decided to go with it. She couldn't stay mad at her father all the time, he usually meant well for her.

"OK then." Zoe said, "So you liked my playing huh? I'm actually trying to make a song out of it. Endless Possibility I call it."

"Sounds cool." Sonic said enthusiastically, "You know, I once thought about being a rock guitarist when I was your age. Imagine us doing a duet, me on rock guitar and you on acoustic guitar!"

"It'd make some awesome noise that's for sure." Zoe chuckled, "Say daddy, do you think me and you could do something together later?" she asked.

Zoe liked to test her father with questions like these. It helped her to see if Sonic was easing up on her or not. Now was the time to see it again.

"A little father-daughter time together? Sure!" Sonic said brightly, "What do you have in mind?"

"Well...you know how you've been to many different places in the world dad?" the princess asked, "Well, maybe we could go somewhere new. You could maybe take me to one of the foreign lands like Chun-Nan, Downunda or whatever. I kinda want to explore the world some more."

She then smiled innocently, hoping it would win Sonic over and grant her wish. Unfortunately, it didn't come for Sonic just narrowed his eyes at her disapprovingly.

"Zoe, we've talked about this." he said firmly, "You're not going out there in the big beyond until me and your mother think you're ready. You've still got plenty more to learn before it's time sweetie."

Zoe's face fell. It was just as she'd feared. Sonic hadn't let up on her at all. What would it take to convince this overprotective nutcase that she didn't need sheltering anymore?!

"Come on dad, what could possibly happen to me while we're together?" Zoe protested, "You never let me out of your sight at home so what's the big deal?"

"Zoe, you will not argue with me!" Sonic retorted, "I told you what's happening and that's final. If you wanna go out me and you together then we can go for a run in Green Hill Zone or the Great Forest again." he suggested, trying to sound happier.

"Stuff that!" Zoe snapped, "I've run around those stupid places so many times that I can walk around them blindfolded! I'm bored of those places dad, I wanna see the rest of the world! See the things that you've seen! What's so wrong about that?"

"Zoe listen here..." Sonic began.

"No dad, for once in your life, YOU listen!" the princess ranted, "You can't keep over-fathering me like this! I don't wanna be treated like a bird in a cage all the time! How can I possibly be independent if you keep watching over me and acting like a bomb's gonna go off under my feet?! I don't wanna stay cooped up in New Mobotropolis all my life! You were never cooped up here for life so why should I be?!"

"I've had to grow up fast Zoe, and it wasn't something I could help either!" the king shouted, "We've told you the stories a million times already so you should know why it was more acceptable for me and your mother back then! You haven't grown up an easy life only to suddenly be forced into conflict so you don't have to grow up as quickly as I was forced to! And I'm only doing all of this because I love you Zoe!" the anger on his face began to ease as he said this, "I just want you safe and taken care of that's all. I could've lost you back when you was four..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I know, the day I got shot accidentally." Zoe sighed, "You think I haven't noticed my damn scar by now?" she snorted, showing the rather small, round scar on her arm that had been a result of the freak accident eleven years ago, "But dad, I'm as fast as you are now. I'm too fast to get shot! I'm not weak and helpless anymore!"

"Being fast doesn't mean you're untouchable." Sonic said matter-of-factly, "I've been hit many times even when I've gone fast. Now drop the discussion before I take you back to Castle Acorn!" he yelled.

"Given how much you keep me on a leash dad, I may as well go back to Castle Acorn now if that'll make you happy!" Zoe snapped, "And I'll go back by myself thank you!"

She then got up from the bench and stormed off, seething with rage to herself. Sonic could only stand and watch as his daughter flounced off. He sighed sadly to himself, shaking his head. He hadn't expected parenthood to get this stressful, especially at this stage. He brushed away a tear that trickled out of his eye.

"Oh man...where did it all go wrong...?" he murmured to himself, "I wish Zoe wasn't so hostile with me..." he paused for a moment as he tried to compose himself. "You know...maybe I do father her too much..." he wondered aloud.

He would keep out of his daughter's way and let things simmer for a while. That seemed like the best thing to do. When the tempers had cooled, he would try again and have a talk with Zoe. And hopefully things would go better then and they'd be able to build up a better relationship...

Back at Castle Acorn, Zoe had stormed up to her room and slammed the door, then flung herself onto the bed and had a long, loud scream into her pillow to release all her anger. She found it therapeutic and that it often helped her to calm down. After she'd let out her anger, she lay back on her bed for a moment to let the peace

and quiet soothe her. She was usually active but often enjoyed a more calming moment every so often. As she lay back on the bed, she began to think. She was remembering some good times that the family had had together. Times where her father was less overbearing and often very fun to be with. She also remembered listening to her parent's stories from when they had fought the infamous Dr. Eggman in a three year war that had changed history forever. How fascinating those tales were!

And was this how she was destined to live? Never to share her father's legacy and experience what it was like for him during those glorious days? Why couldn't she be as free and adventurous as Sonic? She envied her father's old life. How exciting it must've been for him back then, running the world over and stopping villains, many of them larger than life, from wrecking the peace and tranquility of Mobius. She was fifteen and hadn't experienced any of that. And yet at her age, adventure had pretty much begun for Sonic. Zoe turned to her side and glanced at a family photo that was sitting in a frame on her bedside drawer. It had been taken on her fifteenth birthday, a recent memory but a pleasant one for her. Zoe picked up the picture and looked at it sadly. There she was right in the centre with her heroic parents all smiling with a birthday cake in front of her. Her parents often made her birthdays extravagant and Sonic could be very fun on those days too. He was a party animal at heart, even at his age. Zoe sighed sadly at the picture.

"Oh dad, I hate arguing with you so much..." she murmured, "I don't wanna constantly be on edge with you! I really do love you dad...and I'm so sorry that we can't get on!"

It was something she wouldn't often admit to Sonic's face but there were times were she wished she would just say the words already instead of letting anger control her.

"You're my hero dad." she said, "I look up to you, heck I ADMIRE you! You're like my role model as well as my hero!"

She could feel tears coming to her eyes as she carried on. Zoe didn't bother to wipe them away.

"The stories that you've told me, the adventures you've been on, the amazing things you've done! It all sounds amazing and I wish I could live that kind of life too." Zoe muttered, "Daddy...I wanna BE you! I really wish I could be like you...that's how much I really love you! If only you could understand..."

Unable to hold them in anymore, she sank her head into her pillow and cried, feeling that she wouldn't be able to stop for a long time. The picture was still in her hand, the mood of it sharply contrasted against Zoe's sobbing...

Not even the great Sonic the Hedgehog can have a flawless family relationship it seems. Looks like Sonic and Zoe are tense with each other but they really don't mean to be. Will they be able to get along at last? Is their hope for their relationship?

That might be the least of their worries for next time, S.T.I.N.G. makes its debut...

Rising Evil: Chapter 3: New Villains

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 3: New Villains

New heroes weren't the only kind of people who were gracing the surface of Mobius. In the fifteen years that had gone by and had seen Sonic and Sally's daughter grow from an infant to a teenager, the time that had passed had seen something else developing too. But this was by far less pleasant than Sonic and Sally having their own child to raise and shape up as a future Royal Fighter.

Deep within the Northern Border of Megapolis, a secret band of Mobians were gathered together in a laboratory that had been built by the said band themselves. To anybody new to the place, the Northern Border of Megapolis wasn't really anything spectacular or noteworthy. It wasn't even an attractive place to visit. But for any Mobius historian, the border was one of the most infamous places on the entire planet. The Northern Border of Megapolis had once been the home…of Doctor Eggman. During the now legendary "Eggman War" of 2140-2142, Eggman had built an underground base in this very border for him to concoct his nefarious schemes in peace. The base had served him well and had even been converted into being part of his grand spaceship, the Death Egg. All that had remained of Eggman's old base was a huge crater where it had once been. It had been left after the Death Egg had been built and launched into the sky and the crater itself had become a tourist attraction. It was known as "The Crater of Eggman" and was a popular attraction for war historians and people who wanted to know about the fight with Eggman during those long since past years.

But the secret group weren't anywhere near the crater. They had built their underground base a few hundred miles west from the crater. They were still classed as being in the Northern Border, which

suited them. They felt honoured to be stationed in the same place that Eggman had set up base.

The laboratory itself was a huge reminiscent of an Eggman base. It had a similar layout, architecture, design and even the Eggman logo painted on the walls. The floor was solid metal and there was a work table with many pieces of science equipment set up on it. There were even restraint beds and what appeared to be a huge machine that had an opening door and many controls. The machine was as infamous as Eggman himself was. It was no ordinary machine or anything. It was the dreaded Roboticizer, Eggman's most insidious invention and the very thing he used to convert innocent people into cold-hearted, emotionless killing machines who served him and him only. It was a machine that every Mobian shuddered just thinking about, especially as on two occasions it had ended up roboticizing the whole world. But these five Mobians had reconstructed it with their own hands, clearly not caring that they had been enslaved by it all those years ago.

The leader of this secret group was even turning a few knobs and dials on the roboticizer right now as it hummed into life and prepared to activate. There was a Mobian in there already and he was soon to become a Robian. The leader watched, clearly enjoying what was about to happen as he activated the Roboticizer. He was or Mobian…or to be more accurate, he HAD been a Mobian. He had become the first of this five-man band to be roboticized; willingly testing the device on himself after it had been built. The test had been a great success and had made him the first Robian to ever roam Mobius since Eggman's death in 2142.

His name was unknown but to his comrades, he was known only as Scorn. The name was a nickname he had devised for he liked to think of himself as the "scorn of those who despise Eggman". Scorn was a Robian Scorpion, formerly Mobian Scorpion before the successful test had been carried out. He had a black visor in place of eyes, a grilled mouth plate, four horns on his head and spherical shoulders. He had hands but his arms had a mechanism that could

slide his scorpion claws over his hands to use as weapons. His trademark tail and sting protruded from his back and could extend and retract whenever he needed it to. His armour was blood red in colour, making him look like the closest equivalent to the devil Mobius could possibly imagine.

His four comrades were friends of his who had joined him when they had formulated their gang, which was a group of fanatics dedicated to the work of Dr. Eggman and his ideology. They actually worshipped the dead scientist and strongly believed that his vision of a perfect world…was RIGHT. The past fifteen years had been spent trying to duplicate much of his tech and now their hard work was paying off. The roboticizer had proven to be successful and Scorn was giving one of his comrades the treatment. The roboticizer flashed into life as Scorn activated it and huge flashes of electricity coursed through the machine as it worked its sinister magic. Scorn was the only one actually watching this amazing sight though. Just behind him, a Mobian Lion and Mobian Bald Eagle were both around a table together and working on something. The lion, dressed in a black shirt, red gloves, brown trousers and thick shoes was sharpening a sword. The eagle, clad in only a white lab coat, was working on what appeared to be a small, metal, robotic cockroach.

The lion was named Razoul and was the weapons expert of the team. He knew every weapon that had been invented and could wield all of them with ease. The eagle was named Swoop and he was the technician and inventor of the team. Swoop was said to be among the top five best Mobians in the scientific field. There was nothing he couldn't make and he knew every nook and cranny that went into building machines and making gadgets.

Ignored by Scorn, Razoul and Swoop was a female rattlesnake who was busy toying with a helpless Mobian cat who was shackled to the wall nearby. The cat was male and looked as if he'd been abused quite badly by the rattlesnake. He was brutally scarred and had no shirt on. His trousers had also been pulled down and they sagged around his ankles. The rattlesnake had finished with him and was

just pulling up her trousers, interested in what was happening now. Her name was Fang and she was the closest to Scorn out of all them. She had dark green scales and nasty red eyes with yellow pupils that made her look like a banshee. She wore a purple vest-top and mauve trousers. Her tail was tipped with a red rattle that was said to be loud enough to bring buildings down to the ground. Fang hadn't tested herself on that rumour for obvious reasons. She left her prisoner, who sagged feebly in his shackles with his trousers still down, and walked over to Scorn.

"So Breakdown is our next customer?" she purred. She spoke in a thick Russian accent that made every word she said sound more sinister than normal.

"He volunteered, quite eagerly." Scorn replied, "I'm rather curious to see how he'll turn out."

He had a deep, gravelly voice accompanied by a thick British accent that seemed to add an air of menace to his words.

"Isn't it glorious though Scorn?" Fang purred again, "To think that we have recreated the dreaded roboticizer and it works. I mean look at you for starters..."

She put an arm around Scorn and coyly felt his metallic chest. Scorn just let her. He knew that Fang liked to be touchy-feely and had just learned to live with it. He secretly liked it when she felt him up like this.

"And to think all it took was scavenging old technology of Eggman left behind by the war." the Robian Scorpion murmured, "That old computer database that crashed down to Mobius after the Death Egg's destruction in particular was very helpful to us."

"And all thanks to my genius work in getting it up and running again." Swoop boasted proudly, "Without my unmatched intellect, we never would've gotten the plans for the roboticizer!"

Razoul rolled his eyes. He didn't mind Swoop at times but his ego really did get on his nerves when it came out.

"No need to preen then Swoop." Scorn sighed, sharing Razoul's displeasure, "Just continue with your work."

The eagle scowled but did as he was told. A simple acknowledgment of his genius would be nice! He glanced back down at the robot cockroach he was making while Scorn and Fang continued watching the roboticizer whirring away. To them, it was like watching their wildest dreams come true. For a minute, the roboticizer hummed and electricity crackled and then, the process was done and the roboticizer powered down. Swoop and Razoul looked up to see what would happen next. Scorn watched, still as a statue whereas Fang held he breath. Would this be a second success or was Scorn's roboticization just a one hit wonder? The machine's door opened and smoke billowed out. Then from within the smoke emerged an enormous, robotical barracuda. The metallic beast let out a sinister growl as it emerged from within the roboticizer, its sharp, metal teeth glinting in the light. This was the fifth team member and Scorn's second best friend, Breakdown the Barracuda. He had once been a Mobian until now. The roboticization had changed him into a robotic version of his old self complete with metallic blue armour and glowing yellow eyes. His teeth were yellow too and he had three horns on his head. He was larger than the average Mobian too, easily towering over his three friends and his leader. Fang, Razoul and Swoop all stared at Breakdown in amazement, unable to hide their delight. Scorn's face showed no emotion, not that he could with the kind of design his face sported.

Breakdown let out a thunderous roar of joy, clearly pleased with what had become of him. The roar thundered around the whole room. He was almost as fanatical as Scorn himself, hence why he'd been so eager to be roboticized next. Breakdown then lowered his head and Scorn put a hand on it.

"Yes Breakdown, another success indeed." he said bluntly. Scorn wasn't an emotional person but he wasn't incapable of feeling any of

them. Deep down, he was delighted and thrilled that his friend had made it through the process and had been given the honour of becoming Mobius's next Robian.

"He looks magnificent...truly magnificent indeed!" Razoul exclaimed, "Breakdown will definitely bring terror to those selfish Royal Fighters!"

"That he will Razoul, and he'll make them all sorry they murdered the great Dr. Eggman..." Scorn growled, "His vision would've benefited the whole world, made us invincible! And yet they challenged him and took him away..."

"A very big mistake indeed." Fang concurred, "Once the plan is finally put into motion, they'll all pay for their crimes."

"And we will finish what Eggman started..." the team leader growled, "Sonic the Hedgehog will tremble in fear when he hears our name! S.T.I.N.G. is coming for him!"

Breakdown let out a growl that suggested he agreed with what his friend was saying. Breakdown sadly lacked the ability to speak, even before he had been roboticized. All he could do was growl and roar. But Scorn seemed to be capable of telling what he was saying despite this.

"Glad you agree my friend." he replied, patting Breakdown's nose.

He then turned away from his recently-roboticized-comrade and pointed at Swoop.

"Is the bug done yet?" he asked.

"It most certainly is sir!" Swoop announced. He always felt the need to advertise himself, thus he could never just say things like that normally. "Here it is, all built and ready for testing."

He held out a hand and showed the team the completed robo-roach he had made. The tiny machine was activated and it twitched in his hand. The thin antenna wriggled above its head, looking for somebody to attack. The others watched with fascination as it moved.

"It looks like it works sir." Razoul commented.

"Of course it works! I invented it remember?" Swoop sneered, "Everything I make works!"

"Just because it can move, it does not mean it "works"." Scorn snapped, "We need to test it. And who better than Fang's little play toy over there?"

He motioned over to the chained up cat who pressed himself firmly against the wall in terror. He had been hoping that S.T.I.N.G. would ignore him but as is, luck was not on his side. He was going to be used as some kind of lab rat for them now! Scorn picked up the robo-roach and advanced menacingly towards the cat. He was quick to notice that the cat's decency had been violated, trousers down and all. Just like Fang to get carried away with her fun.

"We did tell you we had some use for you..." he said sinisterly, "And now your part in our plan is here."

"N-n-no! P-p-please! D-d-don't!" the cat whimpered, tugging on his chains, "K-keep th-th-that a-away from me!"

Scorn ignored the cat and continued approaching him. Swoop watched, eager to see his invention in action.

"As expected, it should enter any orifice on the Mobian body...and then do a whole bunch of other things I programmed it too." he crowed.

Scorn grabbed the cat by the throat, forcing his mouth open. The cat gagged helplessly, fighting for breath. Now his mouth was open,

Scorn lowered the robo-roach into it and the machine quickly sprang into action. It crawled down his throat, making the helpless victim gag and lurch violently as he was forced to swallow the bug...

Back in New Mobotropolis, Zoe was still lying on her bed, having finally run out of tears to cry from earlier. She had placed the picture back on the bedside drawer and was just staring up at the ceiling. She stared intently as if trying to see the future in it. If she could, what kind of future would she see? A better one than the present hopefully. She let out a sad sigh to herself as she continued contemplating her current relationship with her father. Good sometimes, strained and difficult all the others. If only it wasn't like that!

"I don't want us fighting all the time..." she murmured.

Then suddenly, the princess got a surprise as somebody entered her room. It was only her mother, the one person in the world that she was always happy to see. Zoe even felt a smile creep across her face as Sally walked in. She sat up on the bed as the queen stood in the doorway.

"Hello Zoe." Sally said brightly.

"Hi mom." Zoe replied, half smiling.

"Is everything alright dear?" Sally asked, "How long have you been lying there?"

"Dunno. Lost track..." the princess sighed.

Sally had a feeling that something wasn't right so she decided to come in and see if she could work out what was going on. Upon entry, she quickly noticed that the fur on Zoe's cheeks looked darker than the rest of her body. Her eyes also looked a little red.

"Have...have you been crying sweetheart?" the queen asked, "What's the matter dearest?"

Zoe had expected her beloved mother to catch on. Sally never missed a trick with her. She was probably proof that the saying "Mother knows best" was not just a saying, but a true fact. Looking down at the floor, Zoe's face fell.

"Me and dad had a fight again..." she muttered gloomily.

"Oh no...what happened that time?" Sally asked, sitting down beside her daughter.

"Will you be mad if I tell you?" Zoe asked worriedly.

"Honey, I'd be mad if you didn't tell me." the queen said tenderly, "I can't help you unless you tell me what's happened. Please dear, tell me why you and your dad had another fight."

She gently stroked her daughter's back for comfort. Relieved, Zoe relaxed and began to tell everything.

"He came across me while I was in the park playing the guitar to myself." she explained, "He said that he just "happened to be passing by" though I bet he wasn't. I asked him if we could go adventuring together but he refused and then...well, you know." she finished.

Sally shook her head sadly. Why was Sonic taking his promise to protect Zoe so seriously? She was actually missing the days where he was more carefree and adventurous!

"Oh your dad...I'm kinda getting annoyed with his overprotective nature too." the queen sighed, "He was just as bad when I was pregnant with you."

"He was?" Zoe piped.

"Yes. When I was pregnant, Sonic watched over me like a hawk!" Sally explained, half-smiling at the memory, "It was like he was worried that somebody would kidnap me and use me and you against him. The paranoia really got to him and I had to give him a severe dressing down for it. When you was born, he seemed to lose it at last but then the terrible accident when you was four happened and he's worse than ever..."

She paused for a moment, noticing Zoe's scar, before continuing.

"Please don't be mad at your father though Zoe. He really does love you and he really wants the best for you." she added, circling Zoe's back with her hands.

"I know mom but I just wish for once, just this once, he'd actually lighten up and let me go!" Zoe whined, "I want to be the big adventurer like he used to be! Like in the stories you and him told me! But how can I be like him if he won't let me?"

"I understand your desires Zoe." Sally said kindly, "Believe me, everybody wants to be like your dad Zoe. He is the one who saved Mobius from total apocalypse. If he hadn't stopped Enerjak, we wouldn't be here right now."

That story had always fascinated and frightened Zoe at the same time. To think that it was thanks to her father that Mobius hadn't gone to hell and she was here right now was an amazing thought and just made her more and more admiring of Sonic. She had every reason to want to be like him! The hedgehog that had saved the entire world was a great thing to aspire to.

"But you must understand though Zoe, the day you was accidentally shot was pretty traumatic for him." the queen continued, "I was scared too. We both feared that you could've died that day and we're forever grateful that you survived. It's going to be difficult for him to let go of his concerns and accept that you're growing up and need your independence dear. I'm not saying that I side with him or anything but please Zoe, try to be more understanding of your father.

We raised you to be very considerate of others and I know you can be better than this."

Zoe took in what Sally had said and had a long, good think about what she'd been told. She supposed that her mother had some good points. Sonic's over-protectiveness was only because he had come close to losing her once and couldn't bear it again. She still thought he was taking it too far but for a moment, Zoe thought about putting herself in her dad's shoes. If she had seen her four year old daughter get shot in a freak accident, she would've been terrified too. And maybe she would've gone on to be over protective of her daughter because of it. That was the power of trauma and now she thought about it, it all made perfect sense. Sonic was still troubled by the past and just needed to come to grips with it. Maybe she was being too insensitive after all.

Zoe looked at her mother, who was now softly stroking her quills. Zoe loved it when Sally did that, it made her feel relaxed and at peace.

"You know mom...I think you've opened my eyes a bit." she said, "I think I understand dad's over-protectiveness now. I don't think he should over-protect me still but I think I finally see where it's coming from."

"That's great dear." Sally said brightly, "Thank you for listening."

She and Zoe then hugged each other. Both mother and daughter could feel a warm, pleasant feeling spreading through them as they embraced.

"I kinda want to see dad right about now." Zoe said.

"Let's go see him together then dearest." the queen said gleefully, "He'll love that."

"Great, let's go!" the princess piped delightedly.

Chuckling, Sally allowed Zoe to drag her off the bed and head on out of her bedroom. It felt good to see her daughter feeling a lot happier now. Amazing how a heart-to-heart talk always seemed to work in situations like this.

The two females didn't have far to go before they came across Sonic. In fact, they hadn't even left the castle. They had just run downstairs only to then come across the king hedgehog himself coming through the door and jumping in surprise for he hadn't expected this. Sally and Zoe jumped back in surprise as well.

"Whoa there!" Sonic exclaimed, "Ha, ha! That's not usually what somebody expects when they walk in through the front door!"

"Hi daddy!" Zoe piped excitedly, hugging him gleefully.

Sonic was surprised by the gesture but nonetheless grateful for it. To think a moment ago, he and Zoe had been bickering! Graciously, Sonic returned the hug.

"Hey, what's with the sentiment all of a sudden?" he asked, "Not that I'm ungrateful for it."

"Me and Zoe have just had a little chat together." Sally explained, "She told me what happened and I told her about how badly you were affected by...that day and she's going to try and be more understanding of you from now on."

Sonic was stunned to hear this. But at the same time, he could barely keep from smiling as he patted Zoe on the head. He would never stop being thankful he had married Sally. He would be in a hole without her around.

"Sal...you're a miracle worker." the king laughed, "How you do it, I don't know."

Sally just smiled in response. Sonic looked down at Zoe and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Say Zoe, I'm glad that Sally managed to be of great help but I've got something to say as well." he said, "While I do worry for you and want you safe and all, I do admit...I do father you a little too much. And if I keep doing that, how will you become a great Royal Fighter like me and your mother?"

Zoe stared incredulously at her father. It seemed that she wasn't the only one coming to a realization.

"So even though I'm still gonna keep tabs on you, I will stop being too protective Zoe." Sonic swore, "You do need your freedom and all."

"You...you really mean that dad?" Zoe asked, her eyes full of delight.

"I'm never one to lie kiddo." Sonic winked, "And to show you I'm being honest...how's about we go somewhere new today? Me and you?"

The princess let out a gasp of amazement. Sonic...was actually willing to take her to a new place for a change?! What had happened to him since the argument to make him change his mind so much?! But the teen-hedgehog was too excited to care. She just squealed delightedly and rapidly stamped her feet on the floor.

"Oh you bet I'm up for that!" she cried, "Thanks so much daddy!"

She leapt into the king's arms and squeezed him tightly, making Sonic laugh. Sally could only watch with a delighted smile on her face, pleased to see that her husband and daughter were slowly but steadily making amends at last. Maybe their relationship wasn't beyond saving after all.

"Heh, welcome Zoe." Sonic chuckled, "We'll be back by dinner Sal." he added, glancing over at Sally.

"That's fine with me." Sally said, feeling proud of her husband, "You and Zoe have a good time together and be sure to tell me all about it

later."

"No sweat Sally. See you later." Sonic replied.

"Bye mom!" Zoe hollered, giving her a quick kiss goodbye.

"Enjoy yourself sweetie." Sally said, hugging the princess in return.

Sonic then took Zoe by the hand and led her outside the castle with Sally standing and watching. She had a feeling she knew what was going to happen next. Once the two hedgehogs were outside, Sonic broke into a run and rocketed down the hill with Zoe running after him. She wasn't quite as fast as Sonic was but she could keep up well enough. Sally just watched, laughing merrily as she watched her husband and daughter running together. What a sight to see her two beloved hedgehogs running off together at sonic speed, side-by-side. Wherever Sonic was taking Zoe, she was sure that it was a nice place he had in mind and couldn't wait to hear how their day was going to turn out...

The helpless cat had a completely blank expression. After the cockroach had forced itself down its throat, it had somehow managed to reduce him into nothing more than a puppet for S.T.I.N.G. to control and do with as they had pleased. After the cat had been given the bug, he had been tested to see if he remembered anything about it. He couldn't remember what had just happened, something that Scorn took great pleasure in finding out. That was exactly what was supposed to happen once the bug had been inserted inside his body. Now Swoop had turned a switch on a remote control for the robo-roach. The remote could make the metal insect leave the body if it needed to or activate its most potent feature, which was the ability to control the person it was in. Inside, the robo-roach had attached itself to the cat's entire nervous system, making him totally helpless and unable to move on his own free will.

Scorn circled the cat, his black visor fixed on him. The cat didn't follow his movements or even blink. He was like a machine waiting

for a driver to operate it.

"So far so good..." the Robian Scorpion crooned, "Pull up your trousers." he ordered.

The cat obeyed. It wasn't because he was following the command though, it was because the robo-roach was controlling him. Scorn wasn't sure how Swoop had done it, but the robot inside was able to hear commands despite being inside a Mobian's body. The eagle had done it again, made another successful invention that worked as intended.

"Very good indeed." Scorn complimented, "Now then, activate Order 8643." he commanded.

Order 8643 was a special code that would be given to the robo-roaches in order to make them do the one thing that S.T.I.N.G. wanted everybody on Mobius to do...willingly walk their victim into the roboticizer. The robo-roach inside the cat acted immediately and sent the command up to the helpless Mobian's brain. The cat was forced to obey and as expected, he began to walk straight towards the roboticizer machine. The cat didn't once try to ignore the order, he just went about as commanded and walked straight into the machine. Once he was inside, Fang closed the door and sealed it tight.

"Pity, he was rather fun to play with..." she purred wickedly.

Once he was inside, Swoop switched the roboticizer on. The cat had been a useful test subject and now he was going to be a useful Robian, a win-win situation overall for S.T.I.N.G. As the roboticizer began to convert its sad, unfortunate victim, Scorn turned to Swoop. Swoop just smiled arrogantly, clearly pleased with himself.

"See Scorn? Everything I make works!" he boasted, "I told you the robo-roach would work and guess what? It worked!"

"Yes, I can see that it worked." Scorn retorted, "Now busy yourself with mass-producing those machines for the plan."

"You don't have to bug me to make me carry out that order." the tech-wiz crowed.

He spun on his heels and strode off, eager to start making more robo-roaches. He wouldn't be making every one himself though. To speed things up, there was a production machine that had been built for mass production of important equipment and materials needed for their goals. Swoop had the plans for the robo-roach and all he had to do was upload them into the machine and leave it to do the rest. Now Swoop was getting on with his task, Scorn turned to the other members.

"Lady and gentlemen, this is a glorious day for S.T.I.N.G." he declared, "Our plan is destined to work thanks to the great technology of our very own Swoop the Eagle. Eggman's vision of a robot world is going to come true at last."

Razoul and Fang both cheered enthusiastically whereas Breakdown let out a roar of approval.

"Now we know our robo-roaches work, we have only one more task to take care of." Scorn announced, "Sonic the Hedgehog is the one who murdered Eggman as we all know. So to make sure he cannot ruin our plans, we have to remove him from the picture so that he will be unable to stop us. We are going to kill Sonic the Hedgehog!"

"KILL SONIC THE HEDGEHOG!" the others chanted.

"The four of us will go while Swoop and our Robian cat slave will take care of the laboratory." the team leader declared, "But first...we'll have to find out where he is."

With that in mind, Scorn strode over to a computer and tapped a few keys on the control panel. This computer was every bit as potent as it had been when it had been built by Dr. Eggman. So potent in fact

that Swoop had used it to gain access to all the satellites on Mobius. This proved very useful for S.T.I.N.G. for they would always know where Sonic went or where he was going. The screen lit up with a satellite view on Mobius and Scorn pressed some keys, zooming the camera in on the planet down below. The Robian felt something close to pleasure as he was doing this. There had once been a time where Eggman had done this himself and he was now doing it in his place. It didn't take long for Scorn to find Sonic. The satellite picked up on him and Zoe running together towards a forestry area. But this wasn't just a forest. It was more than what the satellite could ever pick up from where it was. Still, it was enough for Scorn to pinpoint where his prey was and where he had to be to commit the murder that would make his idol proud. Satisfied, he turned to face his comrades again.

"Sonic has gone to the Forest of Chao." he announced, "And he appears to have a young girl with him, possibly his daughter."

"Sonic has a daughter? Ooooh, I could have some fun with her..." Fang crooned pervertedly.

"What should we do with the girl?" Razoul asked.

"She'll make a fine Robian." Scorn decided, "If we fail to kill Sonic then the thought of making his precious daughter one of our own will definitely cripple him emotionally."

"Then we have a plan. Let's go!" Razoul cried eagerly, clearly keen to get into the fight.

"Yes. Sonic will draw his last breath today..." Scorn declared.

He then strode off with his four minions close behind him. Their destination: the Forest of Chao and their target...Sonic the Hedgehog...

The supersonic hedgehogs had arrived at their destination. Zoe assumed that there were here for Sonic was slowing down. The two had arrived to what appeared to be a forest area that was on the outskirts of Megapolis. Just beyond the forest lay Megapolis itself. Zoe pulled a face, clearly uninterested in her father's choice of location for her first day out in a new place.

"Uh…dad? This is a forest." she muttered, "This isn't anything new, I've been around one already remember?"

"Oh but Zoe, this isn't any normal forest." Sonic said with a wink, "Come in and you'll see."

"Do you promise me this isn't some cruel joke dad?" the princess asked sternly.

"Zoe, your old man knows when are the appropriate times to make jokes. This is not one of them." the king promised, "Ouch…calling myself "old man"…I really am like most dads!" he suddenly chuckled.

Zoe chuckled too, seeing the funny side of what her dad was saying. Sonic wasn't usually one to make remarks about his age after all, he liked to feel like a teen forever. Trusting her father but still uncertain, the teen-hedgehog followed him into the forest. She could already see that this was very different from the Great Forest back near New Mobotropolis. There were lots of colourful fruits hanging in the trees around them. The trees themselves didn't seem very local. They were mostly palm trees stretching up to see who could hold their fruits the highest above the ground. The forest as a whole had a very tropical vibe to it, something very new to Zoe. She'd never seen forests like this before. It seemed her father was being honest this time and that this was a new place to explore.

"Wow…" she breathed, "This is a very pretty place dad."

"Glad you think so." Sonic replied, "The best is yet to come. Watch your step." he suddenly said.

Zoe looked down and saw that she had almost stepped on what appeared to be a prickly mushroom-y plant. She retracted her foot.

"Is it dangerous?" she asked.

"Nah, they're not poisonous or anything. It just hurts like hell when you stand on one." Sonic replied, "Those mushrooms can penetrate your shoes easily so don't tread on them."

Zoe nodded, not wanting to feel what thorns in her feet felt like. She watched her steps, keeping an eye out for more prickly mushrooms to make sure she didn't step on any. Sonic continued leading the way, pushing through overgrown cycad leaves and watching out for overhanging vines. Zoe saw one vine and grabbed hold of it. Grinning childishly, she swung her feet up and began to swing back and forth on the vine. Sonic watched her with awe, pleased he had made this decision to take her here after all. He loved watching Zoe play.

"Look at me daddy, I'm Sheen the Jungle Queen!" she hollered, swinging higher and higher and back and forth on the vine.

"If you can do a Tarzan yell, I'll be impressed!" Sonic joked.

Zoe laughed merrily as she continued to swing. Sonic watched, wondering how high she intended to go before letting go. He soon got his answer for Zoe let go as soon as she was as high as most of the branches on the trees and she flung through the air. Then she curled into a ball and spin-dashed down towards the ground. Sonic watched, amazed as his daughter bounced off a rock and landed on her feet, skidding to a halt just before another tree. Sonic ran over to her, the princess laughing gleefully.

"Wow that was awesome!" she exclaimed, "I've gotta do that again!"

"Great skills there kiddo!" Sonic complimented, "You're sure nailing the spin-dash! That was great!"

"Thanks daddy…" Zoe said modestly, pleased to be getting some praise from her dad, "I've been practicing real hard so I can do it like you can."

"I'd say you're pretty close to doing it like I can." Sonic commented, "Just curl up a little faster next time and you'll perfect it." he said kindly, patting Zoe on the back.

The princess beamed. That was the biggest praise she had received in a long while. She would perfect the spin-dash and finally be just like her dad. For now, Sonic led her on as they continued to trek through the forest. She looked around, noticing more weird and wonderfully coloured fruits hanging on trees as they went along. Did any of them taste nice? She would try one later if it was OK to do so. For a moment, they roamed further and further through the forest until suddenly, Sonic put up a hand and Zoe stopped. They had come up to a bush and Sonic was peering over it as if making sure the coast was clear. But he seemed to be smiling brightly, suggesting he'd seen something wonderful. He turned to face Zoe.

"We're at the best part." he whispered.

"What is it?" Zoe asked eagerly.

"See for yourself." Sonic replied, "I'm gonna let you do this without me by your side. I'll stay here and watch."

Zoe was interested now. Sonic was letting her see this so-called "best part" by herself? He really was easing up on the protectiveness! Excited, Zoe climbed over the bush and walked forward to see what was awaiting her on the other side. What she saw was a sight of true beauty. There was a round pool with hundreds upon hundreds of adorable Chao gathered around it. Some were playing in the pool and splashing each other whilst cooing to one another. Some were eating, some were sleeping and some were sitting on the bank and playing together. The princess's face lit up with wonder and amazement.

"Oh. My. God!" she squealed excitedly, "It's a flock of Chao! How amazing!"

"I did promise you this was the best part." Sonic said with a wink, still remaining behind the bush.

Zoe found herself drawn to the Chao, almost hypnotized by their social behaviour and cute appearances. In her childhood, she had often played with Cream's pet Chao Cheese and had wanted one for her own. She had since grown out of the phase but still had a soft spot for Chao. The little blue creatures stopped what they were doing as they saw this stranger coming towards them. Friendly company or a threat? They decided to find out. Zoe noticed that the Chao were looking at her and she knelt down before them. One Chao was brave enough to investigate her, toddling up towards the princess inquisitively. It observed her with curious blue eyes.

"Chao?" it piped.

"Hello gorgeous." Zoe said, "My name's Zoe. It's nice to meet you."

She reached out with her hand, making the Chao hesitate and step back for a moment. It was always wise to be careful around strangers.

"Oh please don't be scared." Zoe reassured, "I won't hurt you."

To prove it, she placed her hand gently on the Chao's head and stroked it. The Chao quickly got over its fear and cooed with pleasure. It liked the gentle touch of this kind person very much. The Chao then came closer to Zoe, placing its stubby hands on her knees as Zoe gently stroked it. The other Chao could clearly see that this stranger was a good person and they all came closer to Zoe, eager to get some fuss from her. The she-hog's face was full of delight as the Chao approached her. This was the most wonderful moment of her life.

"You're all adorable!" cried Zoe, "I wanna play with all of you!"

"Chao, Chao!" the Chao squeaked excitedly.

Sonic watched, a warm feeling of joy building up in his heart. He had sheltered Zoe for so long and denied her such wonderful pleasures like this. He was ashamed that he had ever done so. But he was making up for that already and he couldn't wait to tell Sally how wonderfully Zoe had handled her first meeting with a Chao Colony. For now, he wanted to leave Zoe alone and let her play with the Chao for as long as he wanted.

As he watched, he hadn't noticed that somebody was watching him. And that somebody was now slowly beginning to creep towards him, his metallic tail poised and ready for a strike. The sharp sting glinted in the faint light that managed to get through the sheltering trees. Sonic didn't hear his stalker though. The figure was moving very slowly and very quietly, not making a single noise. But one of the Chao could see the sting at the end of the tail glinting in the light and it sensed danger immediately. It let out a shriek of terror and it flailed its arms around wildly.

"What is it little Chao?" Zoe asked.

She turned her head and saw what the Chao had spotted. She could see a robotic scorpion sneaking up to the bush Sonic was behind. His tail was raised, clearly poised for an attack. Frightened, Zoe let go of her Chao and shrieked.

"DAD, LOOK OUT!"

Sonic reacted instantly and leapt over the bush just as the tail lashed out at him, missing him by millimetres. The sting stabbed down into the ground as Sonic landed on the other side of the bush. The Chao all squealed in terror and quickly flew off to hide whereas Zoe leapt up onto her feet and activated her wrist blades. Unlike her mother, her blades were red in colour. Sonic ran over to Zoe's side and adopted a battle-ready stance as he and his daughter prepared to take on the mysterious assailant. The bush was torn up from its roots and cast aside by the Robian Scorpion as he stormed out into the

open. He leaned forward, centre of gravity balanced, knees bent, hands open and tail sting raised above his head. The princess shuddered, she'd never seen anything like him before.

"D-daddy? Wh-who is th-this monster?" Zoe stammered worriedly.

"I dunno, and I don't think it's a monster…" Sonic growled, "This looks like a roboticized Mobian, or Robian for short!"

"But how? I thought you told me Eggman was dead!"

"He is dead! But somehow, this guy's become a Robian…"

Sonic glowered at his menacing opponent.

"Who are you? How did you become a Robian?!" he demanded.

"I am Scorn, leader of the Sinister Terrorists Involved in National Genocide. But you may call us S.T.I.N.G." the Robian announced, "And how I came to be a Robian is none of your concern…since you'll be dead very soon." he growled.

"S.T.I.N.G…? What is S.T.I.N.G.?" Sonic asked.

"Work it out for yourself murderer." Scorn snarled, "I don't give secrets to Eggman's killer."

Sonic was outraged. This Robian not only wanted to kill him and had the gall to call him a murderer, but he was accusing him of murdering Dr. Eggman?! Zoe was the first to stand up for her father.

"You're wrong! My dad never killed Eggman!" she shouted, "He told me a guy named Dr. Finitevus did it!"

"And why do you care that Eggman's dead?!" Sonic added, "You should be happy that he is!"

"There is no joy to be had in the death of a man whose vision of a perfect world should've been embraced instead of ignored by the

ignorance and bigoted nature of the Royal Fighters." Scorn growled, "And your lies will not save you Sonic. In Eggman's name, I'll see you dead!"

Snarling viciously, he charged straight towards his prey, ready to make the kill…

HOLY SHIT! Sonic gets a nice moment with Zoe and now shit happens! 0_0

Will Sonic be able to handle the might of S.T.I.N.G.? Or are they the villains who will finally take him out? Join me next time as Sonic and his family get " The S.T.I.N.G. of Villainy"...

Rising Evil: Chapter 4 Sting of Villainy

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 4: The S.T.I.N.G. of Villainy

Sonic and Zoe gasped in unison as their newest adversary came hurtling at them like a charging bull. The vicious sting came swiping towards them, aimed directly at Sonic's heart but the king was too quick. He and Zoe both jumped backwards to avoid the full on impact of Scorn's charge.

God, the first time he ever takes his daughter to a place other than what was close to New Mobotropolis and it ends up in a fight! Sonic could only scowl as he prepared to strike back. Sixteen years of peace, fifteen of them spent raising the princess, all completely shattered before him thanks to this Eggman fanatic he was up against! Why couldn't the late doctor's legacy be dead and buried like he was?!

Scorn turned around, still snarling savagely as he poised for another strike. He came charging towards Sonic, his tail sting ready for a stab. Sonic curled up into a ball and spin-dashed straight into the robo-scorpion. To think he hadn't had a fight like this since the death of Enerjak! Sonic could now see if he still had it after all these years. The hedgehog slammed straight into his opponent, knocking him off his feet and sending him hurling into the pool the Chao had been swimming in earlier. There was a huge splash as Scorn landed in the water but much to Sonic's annoyance, the water didn't do any harm to him. Water-proof, he had to be. The king was sure that Scorn had some kind of weakness so he didn't let the ineffectiveness of the water bother him. The S.T.I.N.G. leader picked himself up, water streaming off his body, and he held his hands out in a "come at me" pose. If he was capable of expressing emotion on his face, it'd likely be anger sketched all over it.

"Impressive...sixteen years past and you're still able to hit hard." Scorn purred, "Killing you will be a lot more satisfying in that regard." he hissed, baring his claws

"Huh, you make a threat AND a rhyme at the same time. You must be so proud of yourself right now." Sonic snorted.

"And it seems age hasn't caused you to lose that obnoxious streak that you're famous for." the Robian growled, "Making jokes in a fight is a sign of weakness..."

"Then why am still alive after all the fights I've had with Eggman and many more baddies then?" the hedgehog retorted.

Zoe just found herself chuckling. There it was, her father's famous wit in action. It was good to finally hear it and she was impressed. How her dad could make jokes in a situation like this was truly amazing and just made her admire her famous father all the more. Scorn didn't seem to share the princess's opinion, clenching his fists with rage.

"Your life will end here with my sting through your chest..." he declared.

Then suddenly, Scorn leapt straight out of the water. The amazing thing was that he did the leap with little effort, almost as if he had springs attached to his feet. Sonic and Zoe both stared incredulously as Scorn sailed towards them in his single bound. Zoe ran forward, her blades ready for action, and the moment Scorn landed, she slashed at him. Scorn blocked the attack with his sting, which to Zoe's shock, withstood the impact! The blades were supposed to cut through anything so why weren't they doing so here?

"I know that Queen Sally Acorn has energy blades, hence why I equipped my sting and also my arms with a force-field generator." Scorn explained as if reading her thoughts, "You can't cut through them."

"You think that's supposed to make you tough?!" Zoe sneered, "How about I cut the rest of you to pieces instead?!"

She then pushed Scorn away and aimed a killer swipe of the blade at his legs. They weren't protected so she would slice them apart life a hot knife through butter. But Scorn was too fast. He lowered his arm and blocked the attack before Zoe's blades could hit. But Zoe then swung one blade up and nicked the robo-scorpion upwards in the face, leaving a thin gash that spread from his chin up to his forehead. The Robian let out a roar, flinching from the impact. Now he was distracted, Zoe roundhouse kicked her pained opponent in the stomach and sent him staggering. Then, with her blades ready, she swung them at Scorn, intending to slice him across the chest and damage him heavily to weaken him. But Scorn recovered and blocked the attack with his sting. He was about to attack Zoe but Sonic spin-dashed straight into him before he could strike. To Scorn, it felt like he'd been punched by a giant fist as the attack whisked him off his feet and onto his side.

Scorn was knocked down but he wasn't down for long. He climbed back up onto his feet and extended his tail in size by about three sections. He then spun around on the spot, swinging his tail around like a giant metal whip. Sonic and Zoe were about to dodge but they were a fraction too slow. Scorn hit them both in the feet, sending them spinning in the air and onto their backs. The grass thankfully provided some cushion for their landing but the slam onto the ground winded them both for a moment. While they were down, Scorn charged over to them and slammed his tail down on both the king and princess. Sonic and Zoe cried out loud as they were hit and before they even had time to wince in pain, Scorn spun around and tail-whipped them again, throwing them into the air and sending them crashing down onto the ground. As soon as they landed, Scorn bent down onto all fours and stampeded towards his enemies like an enraged Triceratops. He covered a lot of ground surprisingly quickly but even then, Sonic was back on his feet and spin-dashing towards Scorn in the nick of time. He slammed into the scorpion and forced him backwards, building up a mound of dirt behind his heels as he

dug them in to keep Sonic from knocking him over. However, Zoe curled up into a ball and spin-dashed into the Robian too.

The combined forced of Sonic pushing him and Zoe's added onslaught was too much for Scorn. He was sent hurling backwards and onto his back. He skidded to a halt, a huge mound of dirt almost covering his shoulders and head. Both hedgehogs stood before their opponent and high-fived each other.

"Boo-yah!" Zoe cried, "That was epic!"

"You bet!" Sonic exclaimed, "I really oughta let you out more often Zoe! You're amazing!"

The princess beamed modestly. At long last, she'd gotten her father's approval and had made him proud. She was coming closer to being like him at last. The king then turned his stern gaze over to Scorn and he pointed at him.

"Now then Scorn, for trying to kill me, for worshiping Eggman and trying to harm my daughter, you're under arrest for high treason to the crown!" he declared, unable to believe he was saying those words, "If you come in nicely, I might lower your sentence." he added, a cool smirk spreading across his face.

"A noble offer Sonic but a waste of time overall..." Scorn growled, "You've both been fools from the very start to think this would be easy."

"Really? I dunno, me and Zoe seem pretty on top here Scorny boy." Sonic gloated.

"That's why you're fools, because you think you're on top." Scorn retorted, "Did it really cross your mind that I would come here and challenge Eggman's killer ALONE...?"

Sonic then suddenly realized something. When Scorn had introduced himself, he had said "You may call US S.T.I.N.G.". Why

would he say "us" when it was only him here? He now realized what a fool he'd been. Scorn hadn't come here alone! He had back up! And he was far too late to react as the Robian's alluded-to back up suddenly sprang into action. He and Zoe only just had time to turn around and receive a heavy slam from a huge metal tail that sent them catapulting into the air and hurling a good distance across the battlefield. Breakdown had come out and had tail-whipped them. The huge Robian barracuda watched with what almost looked like a smile on his face as the hedgehogs hit the ground a few feet away. He then lowered his head so Scorn could grab it and the barracuda helped him back up onto his feet. Razoul and Fang emerged from their hiding places too, standing beside Scorn and preparing for battle. Sonic and Zoe stood up, jaw-dropping at the sight of Scorn's team. They hadn't expected back-up like this.

"Oh my gosh...look at those guys!" Zoe shrieked.

"They're just as ugly as Scorn is..." Sonic muttered, "So this is your little "Eggman Is Great" club I suppose?"

"They are." Scorn confirmed, "Meet Breakdown, Fang and Razoul. They all want you dead too Sonic and I assure you, they won't hesitate to put your head on a pike."

"How charming, I didn't know you guys cared so much about me." the king snickered, "Get ready Zoe, this fight could get very ugly so don't let your guard down!"

"Right behind you daddy!" the princess cried, "We'll take these freaks down together!"

This display of bravado not only surprised Sonic, but impressed him too. This was his daughter's first ever fight and she wasn't even scared. She was even displaying the same level of valour he himself had become famous for. She really was following in his footsteps and he couldn't be prouder of his little girl. Smiling confidently, Sonic rushed straight towards S.T.I.N.G. like a speeding bullet. He wasn't charging directly into them though. He aimed for a gap between

Scorn and Breakdown and Fang and Razoul and zipped straight through it. The wind that kicked up from his charge followed and blew everybody but Breakdown off their feet. Scorn, Fang and Razoul were thrown onto their backs but Breakdown remained standing, mostly unfazed by the charge. Sonic then spun around and charged back towards the Robian. He sprang into the air, feet raised as he hurled towards the huge barracuda. But Breakdown opened his jaws and Sonic, unable to stop, flew straight into them. The moment he was inside, Breakdown clamped his jaws shut and spun his head around. Being a Robian, he could turn his head a full 360 degrees without any trouble. His head spun around faster and faster until it looked like a blue and gold blur swirling around his neck joint. Then Breakdown opened his jaws, sending Sonic flying out of his mouth and straight into Zoe, sending the two sprawling.

Zoe grunted from the slam and forced herself onto her feet whereas Sonic looked green, very close to vomiting from being spun around inside Breakdown's mouth. He clutched his head, trying to regain his senses.

"Man...the world's doing a spin-dash around me...and I think I'm gonna hurl!" he spluttered groggily.

"Come on dad, get up! Breakdown's coming for you again!" Zoe shrieked, tugging on Sonic's arms frantically.

Sonic was still very dizzy and Breakdown was coming in too fast for him to recover. With no choice, Zoe just yanked her father out of the way, leaving the barracuda to hurl straight past them. Zoe felt the wind whip past her as Breakdown rushed by. She lay Sonic down on the ground to give him time to recover and deployed her blades again. She ran towards Breakdown and swung her blades. Breakdown could see she was aiming for his tail and he quickly whisked it up out of her way. But Zoe made up for the miss by running toward shim still and then plunging her blade into the section of his body he was standing on. The blade went straight through Breakdown's tough armour, making him bellow in rage as he felt the pain from the attack. Zoe smiled, pleased to have landed a good

attack on her opponent. She quickly had to jump backwards as Breakdown lunged for her, jaws open wide and ready to swallow her up. His jaws slammed down into the ground, hitting the spot where Zoe had just been standing. The princess then aimed a stab at his head but the barracuda got out of her way just before she could hit.

Zoe positioned herself, ready for another attack. But then she suddenly realized she had made a big mistake. Her father was left unguarded and wide open for attack while she was focusing on just attacking Breakdown! She turned around and saw just what she had been fearing. Scorn had grabbed the still nauseous Sonic and was punching him repeatedly, not giving him a chance to retaliate. Sonic could only cry out feebly as he was repeatedly punched. Scorn then tossed the king into Fang, who spun on the spot and tail-whipped him onto the ground. Smacking herself in the head for her stupidity, Zoe quickly zoomed over to help her dad. But she was stopped by Razoul, who stood in the way and roundhouse punched the princess in the face. Zoe stumbled, her head swimming from the punch and Razoul drew out a long, black, metallic sword with a silver cross-guard. The sword looked strangely hi-tech, suggesting it wasn't a normal sword. Razoul had a cruel smile on his face as he twirled the sword around.

"You are an inexperienced fighter." he crowed, "You leave your father unguarded without any protection. And that will cost him his life. I have orders to keep you alive princess but that doesn't mean I can't beat you down first."

Zoe picked herself up, her head still smarting from the punch but her senses more or less back to normal. Razoul was strong and she knew it. She couldn't let him punch her again or she'd be unconscious or even dead. The princess raised her blades, holding them together in an X shape and she prepared to charge.

"Why are you freaks attacking us?!" she demanded, "We haven't done anything to you! My dad didn't kill Eggman and I had nothing to do with him because I wasn't born when he was alive! You're attacking us for no reason!"

"Oh princess, we do have a reason for this, and it's not just about the fact your dad murdered the great Dr. Eggman." Razoul growled, preparing to swing his sword, "You say he didn't do it but it doesn't matter if he killed Eggman or not. We're fixing the one mistake that Eggman made over and over, and that was letting Sonic live so he could foil his plans. We have grand plans ourselves and just want Sonic dead so he can't interfere!"

"Why the fuck do you worship Eggman anyway?!" Zoe spat angrily, "Dad told me how he was mad man who just wanted to enslave the world and make us all mindless robots to serve him! And then he straight up TRIED TO DESTROY THE WORLD! You dumbasses are literally worshiping an insane lunatic!"

"And you didn't think for a minute your father might be exaggerating or even lying about him to make himself look better...?" Razoul sneered.

That tiny moment of doubt was enough to make Zoe hesitate and wonder. Was Sonic telling her the truth all these years or had he spun the story in a way that made Eggman look worse than he actually was? She should've known better than to let herself be distracted in the midst of a fight. In the second she had spent just contemplating this seed of doubt that had been sown in her mind, Razoul lunged forward and swung his sword at her. The princess yelped and bent over backwards with just a fraction of a second to spare. She herself was surprised she had even managed to dodge the attack as the sword cleaved through the air above her. Zoe slashed at Razoul but the lion blocked her attack with his sword. To her annoyance, Zoe noticed that her blade wasn't cutting through his own. Razoul's sword had the same defensive technology that Scorn had to keep his arms and tail safe from dismemberment. The weapons expert smirked tauntingly at Zoe, making the teen-hedgehog growl angrily.

She pushed Razoul away with her blades and then aimed a powerful slicing manoeuvre at his torso. Razoul managed to weave out of the way to avoid being hit and he swung the sword down, hoping to

injure Zoe grievously but Zoe blocked the attack with her own blade. She sheathed her other blade so she wouldn't stab Razoul in the stomach as she swung a punch straight into it. Her parents had taught her firmly never to kill and Zoe didn't want to dishonour them by doing so. Razoul doubled-over, surprised at how hard Zoe could punch. As he bent forwards, Zoe slammed her fist straight on top of his cranium, knocking him down onto the ground. As the lion was downed, Zoe aimed another punch for his head, hoping to knock him out. But Razoul grabbed her by the ankle and tripped her up, not even straining as he pulled on her. Zoe yelped as she was suddenly down flat on her back. Razoul stood back up and tossed the teen into the air. It was as if Zoe weighed nothing in his hands. Zoe screamed as she sailed through the air and she landed...straight on top of Breakdown's head. As Zoe landed, she let out a blood-curdling cry of anguish as she felt the slam. She thought for a moment some of her bones might've broken but didn't get the chance to find out as she slid down from the barracuda's head onto the grass.

The princess lay on the ground, wincing tensely and trying to get her bones to knit again. Breakdown looked down at her, seeing the perfect opportunity to capture her as ordered. He opened his jaws and lowered his head, ready to scoop her up and swallow her. Zoe wouldn't die of course, she would just be trapped in a special compartment inside his body that acted as a containment cell for anybody S.T.I.N.G. wanted to bring back alive. Just as he got close, Breakdown was suddenly slammed full on by a powerful spin-dash attack and knocked backwards. It was Sonic! He had managed to recover and had escaped from Scorn and Fang for long enough to save Zoe. He landed down beside her as Breakdown shook his head to shake off the attack. Sonic helped Zoe back onto her feet, the princess rubbing her head tenderly.

"You OK Zoom?" he asked.

"I've been better..." she muttered, ignoring the fact her father had just used her hated nickname for the moment, "But I'll live. These guys don't fuck around do they?"

"Given they're Eggman fanboys who want me dead, I'm not surprised they're putting up such a fight." Sonic mused, "I'm still disgusted they think I actually killed the guy! True I WAS tempted at the time but I still didn't do it! Dr. Finitevus was the one who blew up the Death Egg, not me!"

"They don't care if you killed him or not daddy." Zoe explained, "The lion guy told me they just want you dead so you can't interfere with them as you did Eggman. They say they're "fixing the one mistake he always made"."

"Puh, so they're actually being smarter than Eggman ever was. Kudos..." Sonic murmured, "We definitely have ourselves some ambitious lunatics to deal with don't we?"

"And to think today was getting good..." moaned Zoe.

Sonic nodded. Why did S.T.I.N.G. have to attack them on today of all days, just when their relationship was beginning to rekindle?! He and Zoe stood back to back as Scorn, Fang, Breakdown and Razoul advanced towards them. The four were closing in, hoping that if the hedgehogs didn't have any room, they would be vulnerable. Little did they realize was that closing in on the two was just as foolish as giving them enough space to move. As soon as the four villains closed in, Sonic and Zoe held hands and began running around in circles together. They had practiced this technique many times together in their training sessions and now they were putting it to the test. Scorn realized what was happening and beckoned for his team to back away but Sonic and Zoe were too fast for them. Their running around in circles created a miniature tornado that began to increase in size and power the faster they ran. The swirling winds were enough to blow all four team members clean off their feet, throwing them all across the Chao Garden and crashing into whatever lay in their paths. Breakdown crashed into a tree but given his large size, he ended up knocking down more than just one. Scorn landed in a bush, Fang landed in the water and Razoul landed near a pile of rocks. Sonic and Zoe stopped spinning around and laughed gleefully at how well their attack had worked.

"That was totally wicked!" Zoe cheered, "We blew them away didn't we daddy?!"

"We sure did kiddo." Sonic said, winking, "We sure as heck make a great team Zoe."

That made Zoe beam delightedly. Her beloved father was now saying she and him made a great team! This was so far the best day of her life and she didn't want it to end. But then suddenly, something hurled through the air and hit Sonic directly in the face. It didn't just hit him though, it had stuck to him and was impaled on his cheek. The king let out a shriek of pain and Zoe gasped in horror as she saw what had happened. Sonic had been hit by one of the prickly mushrooms she had been warned not to step on earlier and it was stuck to his face like an earwig clinging onto its prey. Scorn had been the thrower, having landed in a bush that was surrounded by them. The thorns on the mushrooms had no effect on the robo-scorpion given his hands were metal so he could hold them and use them as weapons. He had more than just one still in his arms and he threw another one, aiming at Zoe this time. The princess reacted quickly and activated her blades. She sliced the mushroom clean in half before it could hit her. Scorn then proceeded to throw more of the mushrooms at Sonic and Zoe, hoping at least one of them would hit the two. Sonic yanked the mushroom stuck to his face off and threw it at one of the mushrooms flying towards him, knocking it away. Zoe cut any mushroom aimed at her to pieces, not a single one coming close to hitting her.

But Scorn was only distracting them. He knew that an attack like this wouldn't have much of an effect but would make a good distraction anyway. Fang had climbed out of the water and suddenly started shaking her rattle back and forth. The rattle made a huge sound that was surprisingly loud, even for a rattlesnake. Sonic and Zoe found themselves hit by the sound and they clutched their ears in agony. It sounded like somebody had put a lot of hard objects in a steel box and was shaking it back and forth repeatedly to make it as noisy as possible. Fang cackled as she shook her rattle, happy to see that it

was working as well as it always did. Sonic and Zoe found themselves falling to their knees as the ear-splitting noise boomed through the air. It was pure torture and they could hardly stand it.

"What's the matter darlings? Too noisy for you?" the fanged-reptile sneered, "Not many people can handle the power of my rattle..."

She continued shaking it, the noise getting louder and louder the more she shook it. Sonic and Zoe could hardly think with how crippling the noise was. In fact...they were beginning to lose consciousness! The sheer volume of the rattle's sound was disorienting them and making them feel weak, as if they couldn't keep their eyes open anymore. That was the power of Fang's rattle, she could knock people out if she wanted to. Sonic and Zoe then finally collapsed onto the ground and passed out. Their eyes closed and they lay still. Fang stopped shaking her rattle and prodded the unconscious hedgehogs with her foot to make sure they were knocked out. They didn't budge. Smiling wickedly, she motioned to her teammates to come closer. It was now safe to approach the supersonic duo.

"They're out cold." she crowed, "Just like anybody else who falls victim to my rattle."

"You've done it again Fang." Razoul complimented, "Where would we be without that prodigious power of yours?"

Scorn approached Sonic and Zoe and looked down at them. It was pleasing to him to see Eggman's arch-nemesis at his mercy and down on his stomach. They had the golden opportunity to kill him! But first, the girl. He glanced over at Zoe.

"Well done Fang." he said casually, "Breakdown, grab the girl. We'll be heading back to base so we can prepare her for the plan."

Breakdown obeyed and scooped Zoe up in his jaws. He swallowed her up, trapping her inside his body so he could easily carry her

home. The princess had put up a good fight but ultimately, her best wasn't enough. He looked forward to seeing her get roboticized.

"Razoul, Breakdown, you two will come back with me to base." Scorn commanded, "Fang...since you like to play with our enemies, you can have your fun with Sonic but then when you're finished...kill him and come straight back to us."

"It will be done my leader." Fang said gleefully.

She could feel a tingle of excitement coursing through her veins. What fun she would have with Eggman's greatest enemy! Scorn and Razoul climbed onto Breakdown's back and held on tightly as the barracuda took flight. He looked like a Chinese Dragon flying up in the air, long snaky body and sharp teeth and all. Breakdown flew up over the trees and disappeared into the horizon, leaving Fang alone with Sonic. Unable to contain herself, the rattlesnake quickly turned Sonic over onto his back and knelt down, sitting on his legs as she looked down at him. She started fingering his chest and stomach, shamelessly groping the unconscious Sonic.

"It's a shame I have to kill such a pretty boy like you..." she purred, "Why must the handsome ones always have to die when I'm done with them? Ha, ha, ha...but at least you won't know about it. And that's as merciful as I'm going to be your majesty."

She then shuffled closer to Sonic's groin, her own nearly touching his. She then leaned forward and put a hand on Sonic's face. A thin, perverted smile spread across her lips.

"Handsome boys aside, I always enjoyed playing with women more." she crooned, "Maybe if Scorn's feeling generous, he'll let me play with your pretty daughter Sonic. You'll be dead by then though so you'll never know..."

She then placed a kiss on the unconscious hedgehog's lips, enjoying what she was doing and feeling no shame over her actions. But then suddenly, Sonic's eyes shot open and Fang found herself

unexpectedly flung off of his body! Sonic was very strong-willed, something that had resulted from three years of fighting against Eggman, so Fang's rattle hadn't effected him as much as it normally would have. He had come to far sooner than Fang had anticipated and now he was back on his feet, anger across his face. He had heard her crowing about grooming his daughter and had felt the kiss she'd forced on him.

"You know, knocking me out is one thing but molesting me and then kissing me while I'm unconscious is another!" he snarled, "You're so gonna get it you pervert!"

The rattlesnake picked herself up, angry that her fun had been rudely ended. She couldn't return to Scorn with the knowledge that she'd failed to kill him! She had to finish him off and fast! Fang was about to shake her rattle but before she could do so, Sonic charged into her and elbowed her in the gut. He had hit her so hard and so fast that Fang was thrown onto her back and gasping for breath. She was winded and badly. Sonic stormed up towards Fang and grabbed her by the neck. He hoisted her up onto her knees and glowered at her. The she-snake found herself feeling nervous. No boy had ever gotten the best of her and she didn't like the feeling.

"Alright you sick little piece of shit, where's Zoe?!" snarled Sonic, "Where have Scorn and the others taken her?!"

"How did you work that out?" Fang asked innocently.

"Well Zoe's gone and so is Scorn, Razoul and Breakdown and you're still here so that means they're gone and they've taken Zoe!" Sonic retorted.

"Wow, and we thought you were all brawn and no brains...I'm impressed." Fang sneered.

Sonic punched her in the nose, so hard that he caused her nose to bleed. Fang shook her head, her nose throbbing from the punch.

"I'm not kidding around Fang! Now you better fucking answer my question before I beat you senseless!" the king shouted, "Where have they taken Zoe?! WHERE?!"

"Figure it out for yourself your majesty." the rattlesnake snorted, "You'll never get me to crack."

Sonic found himself losing his temper and badly. He was so angry that what he did next was completely out of his control. Sonic grabbed hold of Fang's shoulders tossed her straight into a tree. The rattlesnake hit it, the impact winding her and making her splutter. Sonic rushed up to Fang and grabbed her by the straps of her shirt. He pinned her to the tree and punched her repeatedly in the face. Every punch felt like a hammer blow to Fang and she was amazed that Sonic could punch so hard. After about seven punches, Sonic stopped and jammed his face into Fang's. Her face was bruised badly and the nosebleed was even worse than before. She looked as if she could barely stay awake.

"WHERE ARE THEY?!" Sonic bellowed, "TELL ME NOW OR SO HELP ME!"

"I told you once...and I'll tell you again...FIGURE. IT. OUT." Fang spat defiantly, "S.T.I.N.G. never...tell their secrets...to the enemy. You may as well kill me...like you killed Eggman."

"I DID NOT FUCKING KILL EGGMAN FOR CHAOS'S SAKE!" Sonic screamed, backhanding Fang across the face so hard that the villainess was thrown onto her side and knocked out cold.

Sonic glowered down at the unconscious snake and sighed in annoyance, slapping himself in the forehead. The one chance he had of finding Zoe and he instead just cost himself valuable time!

"Well done Sonic...now you've knocked her out!" he sighed, "Looks like I will have to do what Fang says and...figure it out. I'll go home and get Sally though, she's good at working things out."

He then picked up Fang, almost disgusted with himself he was actually touching the perverted freak, and zoomed off back into the forest.

"Of course I'm taking you with me." he muttered, glaring at Fang, "At least I'll be putting one member of S.T.I.N.G. in a prison cell."

He glanced back up, watching the forest sweep by him in a blur as he headed back home to New Mobotropolis. He was not looking forward to giving Sally the bad news...

Back in the Northern Border of Megapolis, Scorn, Breakdown and Razoul had returned to base and were just filing in as Swoop was finishing off another robo-roach. He had gotten the production line started and quite a few of the little machines had been made in the time Scorn and the others had been away. The eagle turned around and smiled, pleased to see his friends back again.

"Scorn! Breakdown! Razoul!" he cried, "How great it is to see you back! Though where's Fang?" he noted, instantly realizing that the rattlesnake wasn't here.

"Dealing with Sonic." Scorn replied, "She managed to knock him and his daughter out with her loud rattle."

"Ah that famous rattle of hers…never let us down has it?" the eagle sneered.

"How fortuitous for us it hasn't." Razoul nodded.

"How have things been going since we left?" Scorn added, glancing over at the production machine that was still humming and whirring as it was doing its work.

"Quite meritoriously." Swoop declared, "I've managed to produce a large number of robo-roaches already and it's not been that long since the work started! I am a genius as you know and…"

"Yes, we get it." the Robian Scorpion sighed, waving a hand dismissively, "Thank you Swoop."

The eagle scowled, annoyed at having been interrupted, but said nothing.

"It's a good thing the work is coming along nicely." Razoul said, "We have somebody else to bug. We've captured Sonic's daughter, Zoe I believe he called her."

"We managed to capture her after Fang knocked her and Sonic out." Scorn added, "She'll be part of the plan. Breakdown, release her." he ordered.

Breakdown obeyed and he leaned forward. He lowered his head to the ground and opened his jaws. What followed was a scene that was like watching a mother bird regurgitating its foot for its babies. Slowly but steadily, Zoe started to slide out of Breakdown's jaws and onto the floor. It was like being puked up just after being swallowed. Zoe landed on the floor, the impact causing her to stir and groan slightly. She was perfectly clean, looking as if nothing had happened and like she hadn't even been inside of a Robian's body. Breakdown backed away as Razoul knelt down and quickly took off the girl's wristbands.

"No more swinging blades from her." he sneered.

The four villains watched as Zoe began to come to, her eyes slowly opening and her senses returning. She smacked her lips as sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh man…what the heck was that…?" she mumbled, "Feels like somebody's…been banging on my skull!"

She lowered her hands and fully opened her eyes. She quickly noticed that she wasn't in the Chao Forest anymore. She was inside a steel base and surrounded by Scorn, Razoul, Breakdown and a fourth man she didn't recognize. Her father was nowhere in sight.

Zoe instantly worked out what had happened and gasped. Then she leapt up onto her feet in alarm.

"Where am I?!" she demanded, "Why have you kidnapped me? Where's my dad?!"

"Where you are doesn't matter to you." Scorn answered, "We've kidnapped you for reasons we won't explain to you and your father's likely dead now given I've left Fang alone with him."

Zoe recoiled, her face full of shock and anger.

"No…my dad's not dead! You're lying to me!" she declared, "You're just trying to upset me you shit-head!"

"Coarse language will not do you any favours." Scorn snapped, "And I only speak the truth Zoe. I told Fang to kill Sonic while we took you here. The moment she gives me a call, I'll know that she's done the deed."

"You've made a big mistake scrap-brain!" Zoe growled, "My dad will likely kick Fang's ass before she can kill him!"

"Not while he's knocked out he won't." Razoul gloated, "Fang knocked you and him out so Sonic will definitely be dead now she's alone with him!"

He then proceeded to laugh a cruel, taunting laugh as if to twist the knife on Zoe. The princess put her hands to her face in horror, unable to take in what she was being told. She and Sonic had been knocked out and while she was here in S.T.I.N.G.'s clutches, he was unconscious and Fang was going to kill him! She couldn't believe it, she didn't even want to believe it. Sonic wasn't going to be dead, he couldn't be! Trying to hold back tears, Zoe clenched her fists in rage.

"You're monsters, all of you!" she screamed, "And I'm gonna cut you all to pieces for this!"

She raised her hands but quickly noticed that her blades hadn't deployed. Her blade emitters were gone! Zoe cried out in shock.

"Hey! Where are my wristbands?!" she yelped.

She wasn't given an answer. Instead, Swoop and Razoul grabbed Zoe by the arms and held on tightly to her. Zoe struggled, trying desperately to break free but their grips were too strong. She could only squirm as the eagle and lion held on tightly to her.

"Let me go!" she screamed, "Let me go this minute or I'll spin-dash your heads into the ground!"

Razoul and Swoop ignored her and tightened their grip on Zoe. Scorn stood before her, his hands behind his back as if he was simply in a business meeting. The whole thing didn't seem like much to him.

"Put her on that table." he commanded.

Swoop and Razoul did just that. They hauled Zoe over to the steel table just nearby and forced her to lie down on it. Zoe kicked and squirmed, trying to wrench her hands out of theirs but the eagle and lion still held on tightly. It was like trying to break free from a strong pair of shackles, near impossible to do no matter how hard you struggled. As Zoe was laid on the table, Scorn picked up the robot cockroach that Swoop had just made and walked over to Zoe. The tiny machine was activated, writhing about in Scorn's finger and thumb, eager to force itself into her body. The princess stared at the thing with terror in her eyes. She didn't like the look of the bug and watching it move made her cringe in disgust.

"W-w-what's th-that?" she asked.

"There's no point telling you. You'll not remember it when it goes in…" Scorn crowed deviously.

He then put the robo-roach down on Zoe's exposed belly. The feel of its tiny, pointed legs pricking against her skin made Zoe feel sick. It was like being in a horror movie, only a million times worse as this wasn't a movie. It was all happening before her.

"Ewww, that thing's gross! Get it off me!" the teen-princess squealed.

Scorn only stood back and watched as the robo-roach crawled over Zoe's belly. Every inch it moved made Zoe cringe even more. Then curiously enough, the machine approached her navel. Its tiny, thin antenna probed at it as if wondering what it was. Zoe shuddered in disgust. She hated things touching her belly-button for hers was very sensitive. What the heck was the disgusting little robot doing? She then got the horrifying answer as the robo-roach then suddenly… stuck its head into her navel! The sharp jab from the head into her belly-button made Zoe flinch and arch her back in pain. She watched incredulously, her face turning white and her eyes wide open as the tiny machine began to crawl into her navel. It slithered down and down like a worm burrowing itself in the soil. Zoe flinched and arched with every inch the robo-roach burrowed down inside her. She was absolutely terrified, more scared than she had ever been in her life.

"THIS IS A NIGHTMARE! A MOTHERFUCKING NIGHTMARE!" she screeched.

Helpless in the grip of Razoul and Swoop, Zoe could only watch as the robo-roach disappeared down into her belly-button. The tail wiggled behind it as it completed its journey down and Zoe watched as that too vanished into the crevasse on her stomach. Scorn had watched the whole thing with sadistic pleasure. Zoe's terrified face made the scene for him. Zoe stared, unable to believe what she'd just witnessed. Her navel throbbed with pain but that wasn't what Zoe was worried about. The robot was in her body and probably going to do goodness knows what to her now it was in! Her heart seized up and Zoe found herself unable to breathe. She couldn't even scream. Terror had gripped her firmly by the throat and she couldn't feel anything else now. The whole world seemed to have

stopped around her. Then Zoe's eyes rolled into the back of her head…and she mercifully passed out…

Oh uh...Zoe's been captured and bugged! What will happen to her now?! Will Sonic and Sally save her? Or is it...too late?! 0_0

Only one way to find out. Tune in next time as our heroes mount a daring "Rescue"...

Rising Evil: Chapter 5: Rescue

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 5: Rescue

Over in New Mobotropolis, Sonic the Hedgehog had arrived home after minutes of running. With the speeds he could reach, he often boasted about being able to run around Mobius in merely an hour or two. As soon as he arrived back at the city, still carrying the unconscious Fang the Rattlesnake in his arms, he ran straight over to the New Mobotropolis Detention Centre and delivered the villainess over to the guards that were on duty. He dumped her down on the ground right at their feet. They stared incredulously at the reptilian woman Sonic had given them. It had been a while since anybody had been arrested or dumped down on their own doorstep.

"Who's this your majesty?" asked the first guard.

"She calls herself Fang the Rattlesnake." Sonic explained, "She works with a terrorist group called S.T.I.N.G. and they want me dead because of what happened to Dr. Eggman years ago. They think I killed him for some reason."

The guard nodded, unable to believe what he was hearing but doing his best to keep a straight face. It was always good for a guard to not show weakness of any kind.

"That's not good at all..." the second guard murmured, "Why are they upset over Eggman's death?"

"They worship him, Chaos knows why they do but they do..." Sonic muttered, "They've also got my daughter. Fang wouldn't talk but she told me to "figure it out" so I'll be doing just that."

The guards looked horrified to hear this.

"They've got the princess?!" they exclaimed, "Oh your majesty, that's terrible! We hope you can save her!"

"You and me both guys..." the king nodded, "While I try and work out where they're keeping Zoe, you two can give Fang a nice warm cell to rot in. If I catch any of the other members of S.T.I.N.G., I'll bring them straight to ya."

"Understood King Sonic." the first guard said, "Nobody who worships that foul fiend Dr. Eggman will be allowed to walk freely on my watch!"

He and his comrade both leaned down and seized the unconscious Fang by the arms. They dragged her limp body straight inside the prison while Sonic turned and headed off quickly to Castle Acorn. He still remembered how all those years ago, he used to run there in case of emergencies or to see Sally Acorn. Now it was his home, it just felt like running home instead of going to a grand, magnificent castle like before.

He arrived at the front door and opened it. He zipped straight inside, quickly searching for his wife. She could be anywhere in a castle this size but he knew just how to find her quicker. He stopped where he was and called out for Nicole. As if the computer lynx had heard him, the holographic avatar that was Nicole appeared before him in a clutter of pixels. Nicole's avatar had changed in the fifteen years that had passed after Zoe's birth. She now sported one large ponytail with a single golden band as opposed to her old twin ponytail with beads look. She wore a tube top with an added skirt that had a pattern that looked like a bunch of pixels merging together to form a wall of some king. She also had black eyelids and black bands around the sides of her eyes. Nicole still wore nothing on her feet, preferring to walk around with her bare paws unlike most Mobians.

"Yes Sonic? How may I be of assistance?" the former Mobian asked.

"Where's Sally? I need her pronto!" Sonic exclaimed wildly.

"She's in the study signing a treaty." Nicole answered.

"Thanks Nicole, I'll be there right away!" Sonic declared, running off before Nicole could say anything else.

Curious as to what was going on, Nicole decided to go to the study to see what Sonic desperately needed Sally for. She de-materialized and then re-materialized into the study where Sally was sitting at a desk, quill pen in hand and scribbling away at a piece of paper. The queen looked up, surprised to see her best friend back so quickly.

"Nicole, who was it that called you?" she asked.

"It was Sonic. He says he..."

Before Nicole could finish her sentence, the door swung open and Sonic ran inside. Sally jumped in surprise whereas Nicole just smirked at him. He truly was the fastest thing alive, being able to arrive at a room before she could finish speaking! Sally was quick to notice her husband looked out of breath and very frantic. Zoe wasn't with him. Something had clearly gone wrong and Sally was already fearing the worst. Had something happened to her little princess?

"Sonic? What is it?" Sally asked worriedly.

Sonic frantically explained everything to Sally but he had forgotten to remain calm and thus, ended up speaking really quickly. Sally had tried to understand what he was saying but all she could hear was a bunch of gibberish because her husband was talking too fast. It sounded something like:

"ReallyneedyourightnowbecauseZoe'sbeencapturedandweneedtofindher!"

Sally and Nicole both looked at each other, perplexed, before turning back to Sonic.

"OK...I want you to tell me that again Sonic. And this time...SLOW DOWN if you please." the queen requested, "I couldn't understand a word you just said!"

Sonic slapped himself in the forehead in annoyance. Now wasn't the time for wasting any of it! Forcing himself to calm down, Sonic began again. This time, he spoke a lot slower so his wife could understand.

"Sorry about that..." he said, "Anyway, what I was trying to say was I really need you right now. Me and Zoe went to the Forest of Chao and were having a great time until a gang of Eggman fanatics showed up and attacked us! They want me dead because for some idiotic reason, they think I killed Eggman!"

Sally looked stunned and Nicole looked equally as incredulous. Both girls looked like a mirror-image of each other with the same open-mouthed, stunned expression between them.

"Eggman fanatics?!" the queen gasped, "And they want you dead?!"

"That's absurd, why would anybody worship Eggman or want you dead because of his death, which as we all know, you played no part in?" Nicole gasped.

"Because they're nuttier than a fruitcake?" the king shrugged, "But anyway, the group calls themselves S.T.I.N.G. and they've got Zoe!" he exclaimed.

"Oh no...my baby!" Sally shrieked, putting her hands over her heart in horror, "Not my little Zoe!"

"I'm afraid so..." Sonic muttered, "They have a rattlesnake on the team named Fang and she knocked me and Zoe out with her rattle. They took Zoe while I was unconscious and Fang looked as if she was about to rape me. Thankfully I woke up in time to stop her but still, that was so squicky I don't wanna imagine it...!" he cringed as he remembered waking up with Fang on top of him. He noticed that Sally was going very white in the face just hearing all of this.

What a way to ruin somebody's day. Sally was glad to see her daughter getting on with him at last and now she hears that her daughter's been kidnapped and he was nearly raped! He could scarcely imagine what Sally was thinking or feeling right now. To comfort her, the king put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her beautiful blue eyes. Those eyes were so lovely they made him feel better just looking at them.

"And it's why I need you Sal. I tried to get Fang to talk but she told me to just "figure it out"." Sonic explained, "I accidentally knocked her out and there's no time to waste waiting for her to come to. So I brought her back here, tossed her in a cell and came to you for help. You're very smart Sal so maybe you can figure it out where they've taken our daughter!"

Sally allowed herself one precious second to be flattered at the fact Sonic had said she was very smart. She liked it when he said things like that. But once that was over, Sally was quick to start analyzing the situation that Sonic had described and working out a way to solve it. If there was one thing she enjoyed, it was being given a challenge like this. Puzzles and brain teasers were fun to her. This wasn't fun though, this was a very serious matter. Who knew what a bunch of Eggman fanatics were doing to Zoe now they had her!

Fang had told Sonic to "figure out" where S.T.I.N.G. had taken Zoe so now Sally was doing just that. Her meticulous brain whirred as she ran through various possibilities. Nicole was doing the same thing, wondering if she could help Sally work it out in turn.

"S.T.I.N.G. is a group that worships Eggman..." Nicole murmured.

"If they worship Eggman than maybe they have a base modeled after one of his." Sally noted.

The two girls looked at each other, nodding as they both came to the same conclusion.

"If they worship Eggman so much, they'll probably have set up camp where Eggman himself once did." the queen concluded.

"And the majority of Eggman's work and even the launch of the Death Egg was concocted in the Northern Border of Megapolis." the digital Mobian added, "They've got to be stationed there!"

Sonic was so happy he thought he was going to burst. The two women were geniuses! Just his luck to have come to them in a time like this!

"Way past cool, you figured it out!" Sonic exclaimed excitedly.

"Don't jump to conclusions Sonic, S.T.I.N.G. might be smarter than that and not be somewhere so obvious." Sally noted, hating herself for bringing down any hope her husband now had for finding Zoe, "But it's worth a shot. We'll go to the Northern Border of Megapolis and search there. As a contingency plan, I'll have Balto the Wolf watch over Fang and see if he can get her to talk. If he can, he can inform us on what Fang's revealed."

"Sounds like a smart move to me." said Sonic, "We'll get going once you're ready Queenie."

"Indeed." agreed Sally, "Nicole, while I get changed into my battle outfit, I want you to spread word to all the Royal Fighters that we have a new enemy. The R.F.S. needs to be on high-alert at this point. A group of Eggman fanatics is NOT something to go unnoticed."

"It will be done Sally." Nicole bowed, disappearing into a clutter of pixels.

Sally knew that at the speed of light, Nicole would be sending a message all over the world to the Royal Fighters. Every Royal Fighter team would get the message, be they far or wide, and every one would be notified on what had been happening and what enemy they needed to be on the lookout for. It was like sending a bunch of

emails simultaneously, only a lot more advanced thanks to Nicole's advanced systems and programming. While Nicole often missed being a Mobian, the lady-in-waiting embraced the advantages that being a computer program had. This was one of them.

Now the lynx was doing her job, Sally left the study and headed off to her bedroom to get changed. A queen's dress was not practical for fighting in after all. Sonic decided to go back outside Castle Acorn and wait for Sally to finish changing. He stood by the front door and waited, having gotten used to the whole patience thing after years of taking it slower. Seventeen years of peace, fifteen of them spent raising his beautiful daughter. Is this what it had been leading up to? Thrusting Zoe into the world of war that he himself had had to suffer through for three years straight? Had he just brought peace on Mobius just for it all to be shattered once more? Dr. Finitevus's cryptic words on the Royal Fighters fighting a forlorn cause were starting to come back to him. Had he been right the whole time?

Sonic shook his head. No, don't ever go there! It hadn't been forlorn at all! Seventeen years of peace had been a long time to be at peace and it hadn't been forlorn at all. It had been worth it and he had enjoyed every moment of it. A part of him had missed the action and excitement of being a hero and saving the world from terrifying machines and monsters and he was partially glad that he was getting to experience it again. But he was looking forward to silencing S.T.I.N.G.'s evil and resuming the peace he had fought so hard to bring back to Mobius more than anything. And the cause wouldn't be forlorn at all, nothing like what Finitevus thought all those years ago.

The king was snapped out of his thoughts as Sally suddenly emerged from inside the castle, ready for battle. She was wearing her battle-suit, which she had had made especially for her and for this kind of occasion. She hadn't expected that she would ever end up needing to wear it given the many years of little crime going on since Enerjak's destruction. Her outfit consisted of a tube-top that left her shoulders and arms bare, grey trousers, a black belt with a red

diamond in the middle and knee-high boots. She wore arm gauntlets that contained the blade emitter rings that Tails had once made for her. On her belt, she carried Nicole's handheld form. The outfit complimented her natural beauty but made her look very action-ready at the same time. That was the intention, to make her look both beautiful and powerful when she wore it. Sonic admired Sally all over, liking the way she looked in the outfit very much.

"Wow Sally, you look incredible!" he complimented.

"Thanks honey." Sally smiled graciously, "I must admit, it suits me rather well. I'd hoped I would never need to wear it though."

"Hopefully after today, you won't have to wear it again." Sonic said, "You ready to kick some butt?"

"As I was back in the Eggman War." the queen declared, "S.T.I.N.G. will regret ever kidnapping my daughter!"

The hedgehog was all too happy to agree with the chipmunk. S.T.I.N.G. would be sorry they had ever come together to try and kill him, kidnap Zoe and worship Eggman while doing so. Sonic picked up Sally in his arms bridal style. It had been years since he had done this and doing so brought back many memories for him. Sally was feeling the same way. It was like the Eggman War all over again, going into battle and being carried by Sonic like this. A part of her liked the feeling of being in Sonic's arms while he was about to charge off again.

Sonic leant forward slightly and ran off, a huge gust of wind kicking up behind him as he rocketed away. Sally held on tight, resisting the urge to squeal with delight as a huge surge of adrenaline kicked through her bloodstream. This was every bit as exciting as it had been when she was a teen and she wished she could enjoy this moment. Her smiling face made Sonic feel the same way. When this was over, they could enjoy this for real, and maybe have Zoe with them too to enjoy it. Sonic whizzed through the open gates and headed off into the distance. He would be at Megapolis very shortly

and if S.T.I.N.G. were there, he would unleash all hell and not hold back until Zoe was safe...

Urgh...what the heck happened...?

Those words were swimming around in Zoe's head as the princess slowly but steadily began to come to. Her eyes were still closed but her consciousness was waking up. Thoughts were coming to her head and she was stirring slightly. Her face made a slight grimace and she budged a few times as if every inch of her body was waking up. She put her hand on her head, wincing as she massaged her temples. Her head was throbbing, a common after effect of passing out. She felt a little sick too, her stomach turning as if she was about to throw up. The princess's eyes slowly opened, her vision blurry for the moment. Zoe let out a sickly groan, the kind of sound somebody made when they were just waking up from a hangover. What had happened and why had she passed out?

Zoe waited for her train of thought to catch up as her vision began to clear. Her headache was easing and she was feeling less sick.

"Ungh...I feel like shit..." she groaned, "It's no fun...passing out twice in one day."

She slowly sat up and rubbed her eyes. Now she was awake, the princess started playing back the events of today. Her father had taken her to the Forest of Chao, then she and Sonic had been ambushed by a freak named Scorn and his band of villains. Then Fang had knocked her out and Scorn had taken her here while Fang was left to kill Sonic. That was when she suddenly realized something. How long had she been out? Was Sonic dead now or was he still alive by some miracle? She had to find out! But then Zoe thought about something else. She had been brought here to S.T.I.N.G.'s base and...that was it. She couldn't remember anything else. That was puzzling to her. Zoe could remember everything else that had led to her being brought here but why couldn't she remember what had caused her to pass out again? She also noticed

that her navel looked inflamed as if it had been really irritated for some reason. It still throbbed slightly too. Why was that the case? Zoe thought hard but no picture would come together in her mind.

"Why did I pass out again...?" she murmured, "Did Scorn do it? And what's wrong with my belly-button?" she muttered, rubbing it slightly.

She decided to ignore it for the moment. All that mattered was getting out of this base and finding out if Sonic was alive. Those questions could be answered later.

"Oh dad...please be alive!" she begged as she got up from the bench she had been lying on the whole time.

It was then that Zoe realized that she was in a different place inside the base right now. She wasn't in the laboratory, she was in what was obviously a prison cell. There was a huge, chunky iron door trapping her in this small room that had nothing but a toilet and a bench. Zoe began to feel scared. She hated being enclosed like this and the small cell was giving her a crippling sense of claustrophobia. Her heart was pounding in fear and she had to force herself to keep calm.

"Great...fucking great!" Zoe moaned, "I get kidnapped by a bunch of assholes and now I'm in a tiny cell that's making me feel like passing out again! I am so gonna kill Scorn when I get out of here!"

The princess remembered something that Sally had once taught her. When in a bad situation, never rush into anything or go straight into brawl-mode. Always relax, take it easy and look for a way out of a problem. Brainpower was the best power one could wield and she wanted to see how much brainpower she had. She sat back down on the bench and put a finger to her lips, analyzing the cell. She had been notoriously analytical when dealing with problems and solving puzzles and now was the time to see if she could find her way out of this cell. This was what was known as "a true test of her skills" and she knew it.

"Hmm...this cell is awfully confined so I don't have much room to run." she noted, "I don't have my blades so I can't cut my way out. But maybe a spin-dash could help me get out. I might not build up enough momentum to initiate a large slam against it given the small space but if I keep banging against it, I might wear it down enough to force it open."

It probably wasn't going to work but Zoe decided it was worth a shot. She wasn't going to spend another minute in this cell! She had to get out, get home to let her mother know she was OK and see if Sonic was alive. That was all she cared about at this moment. Zoe curled up into a ball and spun around on the spot, building up momentum to try and make her slam as powerful as possible. As she spun, she was beginning to wear a slight groove into the floor. Then she catapulted herself at the door, slamming into it as hard as she could. She ricocheted off the door and landed slap-bang into the wall. Zoe rubbed herself, wincing in pain from the hit. The door was definitely good at keeping prisoners in and rescuers out that was for sure but she wasn't going to give up so easily.

"I knew first time wasn't going to work...but hopefully repeatedly slamming into it will." she mused.

Zoe curled up and spin-dashed straight into the door, once again building up momentum first to make her attack as powerful as possible and wearing another groove into the floor. She hit the door, but did no damage once again. She tried the same tactic three more times but all that ended up happening was her ricocheting off the door and doing no harm to it. The teen-hedgehog was beginning to lose her patience. How many times would she have to spin-dash the door until it eventually gave way?! She doubted that Sonic would even have broken through this door so easily. Zoe panted as she bent down, preparing to spin-dash once again but then her foot rested in one of the grooves she had left in the floor. Curious, Zoe turned and for the first time, noticed what she'd done to the floor all the times she'd been building up momentum. The floor was weaker

than the door was! She was actually able to leave some kind of impact on the floor! Zoe put a finger to her lips and thought again.

"Say...maybe I can smash through the floor instead." she thought, "That seems a lot weaker than the door."

But then she thought something discomforting. What if she smashed through the floor but found no way up and out the other-side? She would be trapped under the floor! Her claustrophobia would end up crippling her in the end if that was to happen. Zoe shook her head. What choice did she have? The door was too strong to break and would take too long to even penetrate but the floor was easier to penetrate so she may as well take the easier option.

"Well...hate to say it but...here goes nothing!" she cried, hoping she wouldn't later regret saying those words.

Rolling up once more, Zoe began to hurl around vertically in yet another spin-dash. She was just thankful it didn't cause her to get nauseous or dizzy just doing so or this would've been a lot more troublesome for her. Zoe didn't move as she spun on the spot. She instead stayed where she was, allowing her sharp spines to churn through the floor. Splinters of metal kicked up as she tore a groove into the floor, the groove getting bigger and bigger as she continued to tear through the metal. S.T.I.N.G. really should've known better than to make the floor as weak as it was. Now because of their stupidity, she was going to escape!

After a few minutes, Zoe finally managed to carve a hole into the floor. As soon as the hole had been opened up, Zoe fell straight through and hit the ground just underneath the floor. She was now underneath the base itself, getting an idea on what the world the base had been built upon looked like. To her surprise, she had more room than she had expected. She couldn't stand up straight but she didn't feel as enclosed. The area underneath the floor was pretty open with no walls closing in around her. It was very dark under the floor though and she could barely see a thing. Zoe smacked herself in the head in annoyance.

"Zoe you dumbass! Of course it's gonna be dark under here!" the princess cursed, "How am I possibly gonna see my way outta here now?!"

Sighing loudly, Zoe just decided to play it by ear and see what happens. With any luck, she could come cross somewhere where light seeps through so she'd have some idea of where she was going. And hopefully a way out from under the floor. She couldn't spin-dash her way out, it was far too low down for her to build up any momentum or propel herself up into the ceiling. Swallowing hard, Zoe began to crawl forward...

Unknown to Zoe, Scorn had been watching her the entire time. Her cell had a security camera installed in it but Scorn had hidden it very cleverly when he had constructed the base. The camera was merely a lens hidden by a clear Plexiglas dome that nobody could see through but the camera could easily see out of. Zoe hadn't even considered the possibility of it being a camera for there were more domes near the ceiling than just the one that actually WAS a camera. The Robian Scorpion had been fascinated with how she had worked out how to escape from her cell but most pleasing of all was how beautifully the bug had worked. It had scrambled Zoe's memories so she didn't remember the bug even going in her. That was the most important part of his plan and now it worked, the plan was going to go perfectly. Eggman's legacy was going to continue in ways the Royal Fighters themselves would never figure out and he was the mastermind behind it all! The nefarious doctor would've been so proud of him if he could see him now!

"Once again, you don't fail to impress Swoop." Scorn lamented, "And you don't fail to impress either Zoe. Your intelligence is definitely something we have to exploit for our own gain when Project: Robius commences."

He looked again at the hole in the floor that Zoe had made in order to break out of her cell. He would've preferred it if Zoe hadn't broken out but he didn't consider it that much of a problem. All it had done

was show him what a great Robian slave she would make. Her intelligence would make her a dangerous foe for Sonic and friends! The Robian just hoped Zoe wouldn't need digging out from under the floor later.

Scorn turned away from the cell's security camera and glanced over at a smaller screen that showed off a satellite view of Mobius. He wondered if Sonic was coming his way at all, having found out earlier that Fang had failed to kill him. He had seen the Forest of Chao on the satellite and saw no dead body and Sonic and Fang completely gone from sight. He was now looking at the Northern Border of Megapolis, searching for the tell-tale signs that his most hated of the Royal Fighters was coming. He could see a trail of dust snaking across the screen and so he zoomed in the satellite image. Surely enough, he saw what he had expected to see. Sonic the Hedgehog was coming to him, alive and well and with a bonus. Queen Sally Acorn was coming too. Maybe they could bug her too just to really spite the king!

"As expected, they worked it out." Scorn crooned, "I had hoped Fang wouldn't mess up in getting rid of Sonic but nevertheless, he's done what I anticipated he would. He's as predictable as I believed him to be."

If he had a face capable of expressing emotion, he would've been smiling right now. Trust Sonic to do the most obvious thing ever! How Eggman had failed to get rid of a guy as predictable as this twerp was beyond his comprehension.

"Sonic's coming right to our doorstep, and with his wife no less." he crowed, "Killing him will just be made all that much easier now we have the advantage And since he's brought the queen with him, we can add her to Project: Robius too. Like mother, like daughter as they would say..."

He turned away from the computer monitors with his hands behind his back and strode over to the rest of his team. Breakdown was receiving repairs from the damages Zoe had inflicted on him earlier

with Swoop being his fixer while Razoul was flipping knives up and down in his hands, never once missing them as he caught them by the handle. They all looked up, noticing Scorn was approaching them.

"My comrades, Sonic is coming." the S.T.I.N.G. leader declared, "And he's brought Queen Sally with him. We have another chance to kill Sonic and another high-profile Mobian we can bug."

"Sounds marvelous oh great leader!" Swoop cried happily.

Scorn let out a vicious growl of annoyance that made the eagle recoil in alarm.

"Don't ever call me that again..." Scorn snarled angrily, "Back onto subject, none of you are to kill the queen. Swoop, if you get a chance, you will insert a robo-roach in her. Sonic on the other hand, he is to be killed at any cost."

"Understood sir." Razoul bowed, "What about the child? We could use her against Sonic."

"Indeed we can, which is why I'm going to retrieve her." Scorn declared, "You three...you know what to do."

"We do indeed." Swoop confirmed, "Pity Fang isn't here to join in the fun. Just like her to get herself caught and locked up..." he added, scowling.

"Fang will be alright." Scorn reassured, "Remember, S.T.I.N.G. has eyes and ears all over Mobius. One of which has already tipped us off that she's in prison as you know. She'll be walking free again very shortly."

The scientist nodded, knowing exactly what Scorn meant. S.T.I.N.G. was far from small and Sonic was a fool to think it was just the five of them he had to deal with. By the time he worked out there were more people working for them, it would be far, far too late.

"OK then team, let us welcome his "majesty" to our humble home..." Swoop purred, drawing out a hi-tech pistol from his coat pocket.

Breakdown straightened up and bared his teeth while Razoul drew out his hi-tech sword, ready to use it against Sonic and Sally. The trio all left the room, waiting to greet their enemies while Scorn strode off, intending to capture Zoe so he could use her as hostage bait. Sonic would be a lot easier to kill when he surrendered after all. Zoe thought she was so clever breaking out of that cell but Scorn would show her just how out of her league she was. He pressed a finger against the side of his head and his visor suddenly lit up with an X-Ray image of his base from the inside out. A red dot flickered across his field of vision, signifying to him where Zoe was at this point. She was surprisingly close to where he was standing now. She had a long way to crawl yet but he would be waiting for her. With his plan thought out, Scorn walked out of the laboratory and into a corridor where he would come across a grate and wait for Zoe to come to him. He could practically see Sonic's dead body now...

Outside the base, Sonic and Sally had arrived at the very spot where Eggman's base had once been. They were quick to notice the huge crater that was a reminder of what had happened to Eggman's former place of dwelling. Many years ago, the Death Egg had once risen from that spot. Now it was possible that S.T.I.N.G., Eggman's successors, were hiding here. Sonic put Sally down and Sally quickly took Nicole's handheld form off of her boot. She raised an eyebrow as she observed the crater, noticing that nothing seemed to indicate there was a base anywhere around. It just looked like a crater, nothing more. No visible doors or anything to say that there was anything out of the ordinary.

"This was where Eggman had primarily been based so surely they must be here..." the chipmunk murmured.

"Maybe they have a secret door." Sonic muttered, "A secret door disguised as a rock or something. Just like them to be so cliche."

"Well the fact they're likely hiding here to begin with already shows they're not very subtle..." Sally mused, "Still, better check the area to make sure we're not in the wrong place."

She opened up the screen on Nicole's computer.

"Nicole, can you run a diagnostic scan on the crater and reach down as far as your scanners can reach to see if there's anything unusual at all?" the queen asked.

"Yes Sally, I will begin scanning immediately." the little computer responded.

A wide-spreading scanner beam suddenly leapt out of a red sensor sphere on the top of the device and lowered down onto the ground. The scanner beam was long-ranged enough to reach the crater without the royal couple having to climb down into it. Sally looked at the screen as Nicole began displaying an image of what was underneath the crater. There was nothing resembling an underground base of any kind. Everything seemed completely normal.

"Scan complete. Analysis: Underside of crater is 100% rock and earth." Nicole stated matter-of-factly, "No anomalies detected."

"What?!" Sonic exclaimed, "But, but, but this is where Eggman's base used to be! If those jokers worship Eggman as much as they do then surely they'd be hiding here?!"

"I guess they decided NOT to go for "so obvious it's overlooked"..." Sally murmured, her face grave, "They're much smarter than we could've anticipated. We were too quick to conclude..."

"So now how are we gonna find Zoe?!" Sonic whined, "She could be anywhere right now! We're never gonna find her!"

"Not like you to be a defeatist..." the queen scoffed.

"Look Sal, even I know when something looks impossible! I'm not as stubborn as I once was!" the king retorted, "How can we find Zoe if we have no idea where to start?!"

"Well we've still got Balto at home who will hopefully force Fang to talk." Sally noted, "But for now, as a just in case, we could still check the whole border to see if they are here after all. I'm theorizing they might want to be close to Eggman's old place, but not IN Eggman's old place to make it less obvious as to where they are."

"If that's the case then those guys really are clever little shits..." Sonic sighed.

Normally, Sally would've chastised Sonic for such coarse language but she knew that now was not the time for a lecture. She instead just glanced back down at Nicole, another idea coming to mind.

"Nicole, can you scan the entire area for anything that would indicate there's a base hidden in the boarder?" Sally asked, "Like I dunno, an electronic signal or something?"

"I will try Sally." Nicole replied, "But such a scan requires a lot of power. If I use it now, I may not be able to help you for a while afterwards until I can recharge."

"We can manage." the queen insisted.

The former Mobian trusted her best friend's word on it as she got to work. The scanner beam leapt out of the sensor bulb on the handheld device once more and spread out as far as it could go. Nicole's scanner beams were limited and could only reach so far but luckily for the heroes, the Northern Boarder wasn't a very large place. If you was to cut it away from Megapolis itself, it would barely even qualify as an island. Thus Nicole's scanners were able to reach every inch of the boarder and analyse as much as it could. The whole process took a few seconds, Sonic holding his breath the whole time as he waited for the results. Nicole was then finished,

clearly relieved to have done so as she noticed the power gauge was dangerously low.

"Scan complete." she announced, "Analysis confirms that there is a faint surge of energy a few miles west from here. The Northern Boarder of Megapolis is not a habited area so the surge of energy could only be one thing..."

"S.T.I.N.G.'s base." Sonic murmured, "Looks like we've found them."

"There's only one way to find out." Sally agreed, "Let's investigate."

Sonic picked up Sally in his arms once more and whizzed off at top speed. The chipmunk glanced at Nicole, who was displaying the coordinates on her screen. She was using whatever power the handheld had left to show the two where to go. After that, Nicole's handheld would need to recharge before it could be used again. After only a minute or two had been spent running with Nicole directing the two all the way to their destination, Sonic and Sally arrived at where the energy surge had been picked up. But the king and queen of New Mobotropolis were met with a surprising sight that made Sonic stop dead in his tracks. He hadn't expected anybody to be there waiting for him. But he could clearly see that Breakdown and Razoul were standing together, the latter with his sword already in his hands as if he was ready for a battle that hadn't even happened yet. Swoop was standing with the barracuda and lion but Sonic didn't recognize him as he hadn't fought him earlier. He was still quick to assume that Swoop was another member of S.T.I.N.G. nonetheless. Sonic put Sally down and the chipmunk put Nicole's handheld device back on her boot. She could only glare at what was clearly her daughter's kidnappers.

"Sonic, are these guys S.T.I.N.G.?" asked Sally.

"You got it." Sonic growled, "The robo-barracuda is Breakdown and the lion is Razoul. Dunno who the eagle is though, he wasn't with them when they attacked me and Zoe." he glanced at Swoop.

"Then allow me the great pleasure of introducing myself." Swoop sneered, "After all, I'm mostly responsible for what will soon be your dooms what with being S.T.I.N.G.'s tech-guy. I am Swoop the Bald Eagle, and unlike Dr. Eggman, my inventions will actually destroy you and your sanctimonious comrades Sonic!"

"Don't get too haughty baldy, it'll hurt less when I wound your pride." Sonic retorted, "Now where's Scorn?! Me and my wife would like a word with him if you don't mind."

"He is otherwise engaged." Razoul answered, "If you want him, you have to get through us first."

"I'll be glad to." Sally snarled, deploying her energy blades with a single clench of her fists, "You've kidnapped my daughter and if I have to tear your base apart just to get her back, don't think I'll hesitate!"

Razoul and Swoop just snickered, clearly finding humour in Sally's attempt to intimidate them.

"You've got spunk your highness...roboticizing you will be a lot of fun for us." Swoop sneered.

"I just hope you'll put up a better fight than your precious Zoe did with me." Razoul crowed, twirling his sword around.

"I've had years of experience on the battlefield, you have no idea who you're up against." Sally stated, her tone matter-of-fact, without even a slight hint of arrogance or self-aggrandizing to it.

"That and she's got me backing her up so you three are pretty much chilli-sauce!" Sonic declared, "You give Zoe back to us and maybe we'll kick your butts a little softer."

"Tempting...but I'm going to say no." the bald eagle snorted, "Breakdown, tenderize them!" he barked.

Roaring a thunderous bellow, Breakdown leapt straight over Swoop and Razoul and hurled straight towards his prey, his jaws open wide and ready to scoop them up inside...

Back inside the base, Zoe was still crawling across the floor, hoping to find a way back to the surface. She had been crawling for several minutes though to the princess, it felt much longer. There was no way of telling time in total darkness like this. She was beginning to get increasingly claustrophobic too. She was desperate to stand up straight but the floor above her was much too low down for her to do so. The walls were also beginning to get narrower as she crawled on. Zoe was feeling as if they were closing in on her. What if they got too narrow for her to crawl and she got stuck? The hedgehog began to breathe fast, feeling light-headed as a result. She was getting close to panicking. No, don't go there. Don't panic! Zoe forced herself to slow down her breathing. Whatever she did under here, she must not panic. Panicking would make things worse.

"Keep it steady girl...you can do it..." she whispered to herself.

She had learned that reassuring oneself was a good way to keep calm and not lose spirit. If she reassured herself it was OK, she would be fine. Zoe then pressed on, now feeling less agitated.

"Can't be too much further before I find a way out." she thought aloud, "There must be some way in and out of the floor after all."

Then suddenly, as if fate had read her mind, Zoe saw a streak of light coming in from above! The princess felt excited. Yes! She'd found a way out at last! She quickly crawled over towards the light. It looked like it was coming through a grate of some kind. There were no shadows indicating any bars so if there was meant to be a grate there, it must be open. That puzzled Zoe. Why would there be a grate open in the floor? Had it been accidentally left open or was this some kind of trap? No, it couldn't be. Scorn and the others couldn't possibly know she had escaped. Still being cautious, Zoe crept into the light and looked up. The moment she did, a hand lashed down

and grabbed at her. Zoe retracted back, the hand hitting the spot where she had been instead. It was a metallic hand with sharp claws. It was just as she'd feared, Scorn was lying in wait for her! She mentally scolded herself for being so stupid. Of course Scorn would have a way of knowing if she'd escaped her cell! The hand then began feeling around for Zoe, itching to grab hold of her. Zoe instead grabbed the hand and let Scorn pull her out as he wrenched his hand back out of the grate. She was now out from under the floor and in a corridor, holding on tightly to Scorn's hand. The Robian Scorpion growled at her and was about to hit her by the princess kicked him in the face and made him stagger backwards. She landed on the floor and picked up the grate that should've been over the square hole in the floor but had been removed so Scorn could seize her. She tossed the panel straight into Scorn's head, hitting it hard with a loud clang and knocking Scorn over onto his back. The corner of the grate had hit him, leaving a nasty dent where it had struck. The Robian picked himself up, rubbing his head.

"You anticipated my trap...I'm impressed." he purred, "You not only managed to escape your cell, a feat no other prisoner of ours has accomplished, but you were ready for the possibility of an ambush. You are an intelligent little girl Zoe..."

"Flattered." the princess muttered, "Now I'm giving you the option to back off so I can go home and find out if my dad's still alive or I can beat the shit outta you! And don't think you'll have an easier time since I don't have my blades either!"

"You proved yourself a capable fighter earlier so I'm not expecting you to go down easily." Scorn snapped, "But don't expect to leave here alive. You're not going anywhere expect back in your cell."

"Just try it bug-brains!" Zoe snarled.

She then curled into a ball and spin-dashed straight into Scorn, throwing him across the corridor and straight into the closed door at the end...

Sonic and Sally have found S.T.I.N.G.! Zoe has escaped her cell! But can she escape the base too? And can Sonic and Sally reach her in time? And what does Scorn mean by S.T.I.N.G having eyes and ears everywhere and Fang will be free shortly?

All these things and more next time as our heroes "Escape from S.T.I.N.G."...

Rising Evil: Chapter 6 Escape from STING

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 6: Escape from S.T.I.N.G.

Fang had been awake for a while now. She had come to from her being knocked out by Sonic earlier just after the aforementioned hedgehog had left with Sally to rescue Zoe. The rattlesnake had quickly realized what was going on and what had happened upon noticing her surroundings. She was in a cell, a huge metal square of three walls and a glass door separating her from the outside world. There was only a bed, a sink and a toilet for her to use, nothing more. If the word "boring" had an image to sum it up, it would look like this cell.

There was only one person watching the cell, and that was Balto the Wolf. He had been watching the moment Sally had assigned him to keep an eye on her. He was instructed to interrogate Fang and make her tell him where S.T.I.N.G. was located if Sonic and Sally needed him to. He had watched as Fang had used the sink to wet her hands and wipe her face clean from the dried up blood just under her nose. The villainess was seething with anger to herself. Why hadn't she killed Sonic when she had the chance? Why did she let her sexual tendencies get the best of her?! Now she was stuck in a cell with no way of calling for help! If she ever got out of this cell, she would rectify her mistake. Next time she had Sonic unconscious, she would just kill him already.

In the time that the king and queen had spent looking for S.T.I.N.G.'s base, Fang had remained silent, never once saying a word to Balto. Balto kept his eyes fixated on her, never once letting his attention divert from his task at hand. He hadn't received any calls indicating they needed that Plan B yet so he was still standing and waiting, treating Fang as if she was a bomb waiting to go off. The rattlesnake had tried to use her rattle to knock him out so he could stop spying

on her but the glass muffled the effects of her rattle power. While it wasn't sound proof, it was enough to make her weapon useless. Fang seemed irritated at this, realizing that in order for her weapon to work, there had to be nothing muffling the sound so her victims could hear it clearly.

After that, she'd just slumped on the bed, hoping that Balto would go away. The wolf did not leave. He was still watching her. He was secretly impressed at how long Fang had been keeping quiet for. It was almost as if the reptile wanted to show that she wasn't intimidated and was maybe even trying to make him feel uneasy by being silent.

This woman sure is a creepy character... he thought, *But I won't let that deter me. My duty to the crown comes first...*

Balto often prided himself on his loyalty to not only the Royal Fighters Service, but the king and queen of New Mobotropolis. Any treason committed against the crown was considered unforgivable in his eyes. And hearing about S.T.I.N.G. and their plans to kill Sonic whilst also worshiping the king's long since passed arch-enemy was enough to make him want to declare war on the group. As long as he was around, he would make sure Fang did not leave this cell.

Then suddenly, to his surprise, the rattlesnake sat up and walked up towards him, a cold smile on her scaly face. This was the closest she had gotten to the sergeant wolf the whole time he'd been watching her. Balto braced himself, preparing for whatever was going to happen next.

"Can you kindly piss off already?" Fang snorted, "I feel violated with you watching me like that."

The tone of her voice didn't exactly match her words. She sounded almost like she was taunting the wolf. The R.F.S. sergeant frowned.

"You're one to talk given you attempted to rape his majesty the king..." he snarled.

Sally had been generous enough to tell him that important fact. Fang seemed almost amused that he knew about that.

"Can't say I'm surprised that your precious king blabbed about that..." she sneered, "Just like that self-righteous hedgehog to complain over nothing."

"Actually, I came to know about that from her majesty the queen, who had been told by Sonic." Balto corrected, "And you're sick if you think the fact you almost raped him is "complaining over nothing"! I swear I could just open up this cell and hammer you into the ground right now!" he snarled.

"Oh good, I like a man who can give me a good banging." Fang jeered, "It's more fun for me when I end up breaking them that way."

Balto could feel himself losing his temper and he had to force himself not to go out of control. This pervert was just trying to agitate him, make him lose control and do something stupid because of it. He wouldn't let Fang get to him. Composing himself, Balto spoke again, his tone a lot softer now.

"So Fang, tell me. Why does your group, S.T.I.N.G. I believe they're called, worship Eggman?" the sergeant asked, "Do you even realize what Eggman did when he was alive?"

"He roboticized us all and made us his personal slaves, yes, we know all about that." Fang said casually, "So what?"

"So what? SO WHAT?!" Balto shouted, "You mean to tell me that you seem perfectly fine with the fact that Eggman wanted to enslave us all and take away our freedom?! You think that's OK?!"

"The enslaving part is the only thing we took issue with." the rattlesnake retorted, "Otherwise, we think Eggman had the right mindset for a perfect world. Can you imagine the many benefits of a world where everybody is a robot? Disease would never take away innocent lives, we would live forever, we would never be victims of

tragedy again and anything that breaks in us could just be replaced. Why is it the Royal Fighters Service is too self-righteous and sanctimonious to realize that Eggman's vision of a perfect world is the right one? Are you really all so blind to the facts that rather than beneficial, you see a world of robots as nothing more than what you perceive as "wrong"?"

Balto could scarcely believe what he was hearing. He had known Dr. Eggman as an evil, dictatorial man with delusions of grandeur and had always supported the R.F.S. in its attempts to stop him. He had even fought alongside many fellow soldiers before he had been promoted to sergeant. And now he was listening to this freak of nature actually saying the R.F.S. were wrong to fight against Eggman and Eggman's vision was the correct one all along?! He was sure that he was dreaming or at least hearing things. Nobody in the world could be this blind to reality could they?!

Balto places his hands against the glass, his face contorted with hate. Fang didn't seem to care. She just seemed to think the whole thing was a game for her. She was riling him up and enjoying it.

"I won't deny you do make fair points in what you've said." the wolf growled, "But why worship Eggman? He wasn't interested in benefiting us at all! Just enslaving us! Did that important fact ever cross your mind at all or is it about time I took off your fangirl goggles?!"

"We know that and we don't worship Eggman for wanting to enslave us." Fang retorted, "You must've heard me wrong when I said "the enslaving part was the only thing we took issue with". Me and my fellow S.T.I.N.G. members worship the late doctor for his great vision, not his dictatorship. We believe a world of robots is what Mobius should be. We could be the greatest race in the entire galaxy and nobody would ever be a match for us. Remember the alien invasions we've had to endure? Three if I recall. If we were to be invaded again...ha, ha, ha...we would be invincible if we were all Robians."

She paused for a moment, running her forked tongue over her scaly lips.

"Don't you see you short-sighted clod? Sonic is the one who deserves to be locked up, not me or anybody else I'm affiliated with." the reptillian woman hissed, "We could be greater than ever before what with Eggman's great view of a perfect world and he's holding us back. Sonic and anybody affiliated with him are true dictators, they're the ones who think they know what is best for us. They're just like all the idiots who opposed the doctor. They just don't like what they don't perceive as..."natural". You're all scared of change, all scared of what you don't agree with. And all Sonic has done is taken advantage of all of your fears, blinded you with his own arrogance and self-righteous beliefs and manipulated you all into believing that he is right and everybody against him is wrong. So tell me wolf boy...why do you worship a king who's in a sense, thrice the dictator Dr. Eggman ever was?"

That did it. Balto finally lost his cool and banged against the door in anger. Several guards who were watching over the whole detention centre looked up, wondering what was going on. One guard in particular, a Mobian mole with golden fur and buck teeth, looked nervous. He was directly behind Balto, watching over a cell facing Fang's, and wondering whether to get involved or not. The sergeant gritted his teeth as he thumped the button on the control panel that would open Fang's cell. The glass door rose up and Balto then thumped the close button as he rolled into the cell so Fang wouldn't be able to escape. The door slammed shut, trapping the villainess snake with the enraged wolf. Balto grabbed hold of Fang and threw her straight into the wall at the back of her cell. Fang hit it and came down with a thud onto the bed. She scrambled onto her feet only for the wolf to then grab her by the neck and slam her head against the sink. Fang was disoriented by the slam and blood started trickling out of a slight wound in her forehead. Balto then pinned her to the wall, his face a snarling mask of fury with his eyes tiny pinpricks of rage.

"DON'T YOU EVER, EVER BADMOUTH HIS MAJESTY, **DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?!** " the sergeant bellowed, his voice so loud that even the glass door couldn't muffle the volume of it. Every prisoner on the block heard him bellowing and just considered themselves lucky Balto wasn't in there with them.

"Careful sergeant, your loyalty to the crown will only get you killed..." Fang taunted.

Balto drew his arm back, ready to land a killer punch to the snake's throat. If anybody asked about it, he would lie to them, say that Fang was trying to kill him and he only reacted defensively. He had no choice, it was kill or be killed. Balto's punch would slam straight into the middle of the snake's neck, crushing her windpipe and suffocating her. Fang deserved to die and that's all he cared about. But then suddenly, an ear-splitting bang was heard from directly behind Balto. And following the bang came a spray of blood leaping out from behind the wolf's head. Balto's eyes widened upon being hit. Then he crumpled, collapsing down onto the floor dead. Blood began to pour out from the wound in his head, forming a grotesque red puddle underneath him. Fang didn't even look shocked or surprised that had happened. It was as if...she had ANTICIPATED this to happen! She smiled, pleased to see the foolish sergeant dead at her feet.

"Well done Ramirez." she purred, "Your loyalty to S.T.I.N.G. will be rewarded once I get back to base.

Ramirez was the mole who had watched Balto lose his cool and storm into Fang's cell. He had opened up the cell once Balto had closed it and had shot the sergeant before he could kill the rattlesnake. Ramirez wasn't even a real guard working for the Detention Centre. He was a mole in every possible meaning of the word, his loyalty not to Sonic or the crown. He was with S.T.I.N.G., one of many hidden agents they had around the world. He had been pretending to be a guard for over a week, waiting for the right time to reveal his hand. That time had just come. Ramirez walked up to Fang, his expression blank as he raised his arm and turned a dial on

what looked like a watch he wore. It wasn't a watch, it was a highly sophisticated gadget that produced a hologram around the person who wore it, a holographic emitter.

His true species was not in fact, a mole, but a chameleon with dark green scales and a tattoo of the Dr. Eggman symbol on his forehead. Ramirez was S.T.I.N.G.'s "chameleon man", his job being to disguise himself as anybody he could and slip in, mingling in with the crowd until the time was right for him to reveal himself. He also had a crush on Fang and would do anything to keep her safe. The rattlesnake embraced him, grateful for his save.

"You truly are the kind of man a woman dreams about..." Fang purred.

"My loyalty is to you and anyone you're associated with." Ramirez declared, "All the idiots who opposed Eggman will pay for their bigoted behaviour against him!"

"And wolf boy here has done just that..." the snake crowed.

Fang and Ramirez then walked out of the cell together, side-by-side, as all the other guards formed a defensive wall to keep them from leaving. A few of them had witnessed Balto's murder and were quick to inform the others. Now they were together, determined to stop the two reptiles from leaving.

"Halt! Stay where you are or we will open fire!" snarled one of the guards.

Fang instead just shook her rattle. The loud sound pounded around the room and the guards all clutched their ears in agony. The noise was disorienting them and they were all finding it hard to stay focused. Fang continued shaking, Ramirez just standing by and watching with a sick smile on his face. Then, one by one, all the guards in the prison began to collapse on to the floor, completely unconscious. Satisfied, Fang and Ramirez walked on out of the Detention Centre and into the open city outside. Fang found herself

feeling a twinge of excitement. She was there, right in the heart of Sonic's kingdom! New Mobotropolis itself was all hers! She wanted to get back to base but the serpent woman had other ideas. Why leave now when she could take advantage of this situation?

"Ramirez, before we leave...I have something I want to do." Fang purred.

"What is that then m'lady?" the chameleon asked.

"We could easily leave our mark in New Mobotropolis, let S.T.I.N.G show this pathetic city that it is to be taken seriously and we are no hollow threat." the snake suggested.

"What do you have in mind?" Ramirez asked.

Fang glanced over at Castle Acorn, standing tall and proud in the middle of the city like a king overlooking his kingdom. Seeing it made her smile a sick smile of delight.

"What better way to take a shot at the king than to destroy his own castle...?" Fang hissed gleefully.

Ramirez nodded, knowing exactly what his love was talking about.

"Then let's do it." he said enthusiastically, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a small, spherical object...

Meanwhile, Sonic and Sally braced themselves as Breakdown came charging towards them like an aircraft performing a dive-bomb manouvere. The sheer size and speed of the Robian barracuda was enough to make the two dive for cover before they could be hit. Breakdown slammed into the ground, kicking up chunks of soil and stone as his narrow, javelin shaped jaws scraped the surface. Before he could attack again, Sally leapt onto Breakdown's back and plunged her laser blades straight into his back. Breakdown let out a horrible, metallic screech as he was penetrated. To him, the stab hurt

as much as a stab through flesh and bone would normally hurt. The Robian writhed around frantically, trying to throw the queen off of himself. Sally's blades were still in his back, making it hard to shake her off. The queen then pulled her arms upwards, leaving two large gashes across his back. Breakdown screeched again, feeling a mixture of both pain and anger. He turned his head and opened his jaws. He lashed towards Sally, intending to snatch her up and swallow her whole, imprisoning her inside as he had done to Zoe earlier. But Sally jumped off, causing Breakdown to miss and bite himself by accident. The attack left Breakdown full of deep, puncturing holes where he had bitten himself. He let out another roar of annoyance, angered his prey was getting the best of him.

Sally adopted a battle-ready stance, daring Breakdown to attack her again. The barracuda's jaws snapped open and he charged towards the chipmunk. He was going to make her pay for what she'd done to him and Scorn would be proud of him for doing so. But he never got close as Sonic jumped in front of his wife and spin-dashed Breakdown directly in his open mouth. It was like throwing a rock straight into a predator's open mouth, only a lot more painful. Breakdown was completely taken by surprise as the spin-dash slammed into him and threw him down onto his back. The ground shuddered as he hit it. Sonic landed down beside Sally, smirking confidently.

"Fifteen years spent raising our kid and we still know how to kick butt together!" he crowed.

"It's almost like no time has passed for us." Sally concurred, "Hopefully when this is over, things can go back to being peaceful."

"A part of me agrees with that, a part of me is enjoying getting to play the hero thing again." Sonic admitted, "But the part of me that agrees with you is more important." he added quickly.

"I should hope so too." Sally smirked.

Swoop and Razoul were both surprised and annoyed that Sonic and Sally were making Breakdown look pathetic so the eagle and lion decided now would be the time for them to get involved. Razoul raised his sword, his cold blue eyes fixed on Sally while Swoop decided to gun for Sonic. The eagle had armed himself with a couple of weapons he had invented. One looked like a metallic boxing glove with a triangular emitter that he wore over his right hand. The other weapon was a hi-tech pistol that could stun, kill and shoot either lasers, fireballs or ice blasts. He had tested the weapons himself and as usual, they worked. Anything he made always worked. Swoop aimed the boxing glove at Sonic just as the king began to charge towards him. The weapon was a shield-generator and as Sonic spin-dashed towards him, a translucent green force-field formed out of the device and spread out to protect Swoop from the front. The hedgehog hit the shield, bouncing away from it as the energy repelled him away. The scientist laughed, pleased to see that his device protected him beautifully.

"Hey murderer, check out my spin-dash deflector!" Swoop crowed.

Sonic growled in annoyance. He absolutely hated it when people had defences like this. It made them more annoying to fight. But the king was still determined to show Swoop that he was far out of his depth with him. He sped towards Swoop again, hoping to jump over the force-field and hit him from behind. But the tech-wizard aimed his pistol at Sonic and fired a hail of blazing spheres at the royal hedgehog. Sonic cried out as he was nearly hit by the embers and he quickly jumped and weaved around to avoid them. Swoop laughed arrogantly, already convinced he was going to win this fight with ease. He couldn't understand why Eggman had failed time and again to get rid of this pestilent, full-of-himself king. He switched the setting of his pistol and started firing shards of ice at Sonic. The icicles were razor-sharp and would cut him to pieces if he was hit. Sonic curled up and spun around, allowing his spines to churn up the icicles as they hit him.

"Geez, and I thought Blizzard the Ice Witch was bad enough with her ice powers!" he cried.

He then propelled himself forwards in another spin-dash, hurling towards Swoop. He was hoping to hit him before he could raise the shield again. But no such luck. Swoop held the force-field in front of himself again and Sonic hit it. But as he hit, Swoop angled the shield slightly so Sonic was sent careening to the left. Unable to stop himself, the king hurled through the air and crashed straight into Sally, knocking her down onto her side just as she had been preparing to block an attack from Razoul. The royal duo lay sprawled on the ground, wondering what had happened. Razoul seized his chance and raised his sword, hoping to cleave both opponents in two. Sally managed to recover just in time to hold her blades together, blocking Razoul's strike as he swung the sword down. She then kicked him in the knees, forcing him to back off and bend over so she and Sonic had the chance to get back up again. The moment they were up though, Swoop held out the shield-generator and charged into the hedgehog and chipmunk. Sonic and Sally were slammed by the shield and the energy repelled them, sending them flying through the air as if they'd been punched really hard. They both hit the ground, wincing as they fought to get their bones to knit again. Swoop laughed confidently, enjoying himself immensely.

"For the most creative use of a shield-generator in a supporting role, the winner is...Swoop!" he gloated.

"Enough bragging, let's kill the infidel and bring his broad to Scorn!" Razoul snarled.

He was already running towards Sonic and Sally, his sword raised and ready to cut the king's head clean off. Swoop followed him, his pistol set to kill so he could just shoot Sonic dead. Breakdown, who was recovering from the earlier onslaughts he'd received, joined in the charge, flying after them like a Chinese Dragon weaving through the sky. But as they neared, Sally suddenly sprang up onto her feet and spun around like a killer spinning-top. This forced Swoop to stop and protect himself and Razoul to raise his sword to block her

slashes. Even Breakdown hesitated. The queen stopped spinning and prepared herself for another attack. She had heard what Razoul had said and was deeply offended by what he'd called her.

"Don't ever call me a broad..." she snarled viciously.

Then she lashed out and slashed Razoul across the chest, moving so fast that the lion didn't even have chance to block her. Razoul bellowed in pain, dropping his sword in anguish. To finish off, Sally raised her leg up high and brought it slamming down onto the swordsman's head, knocking him out instantly. Swoop aimed the pistol at Sally, now setting it to stun since he had to keep her alive. But now he was distracted, Sonic charged into him in a powerful homing-attack. The slam caught the eagle so off-guard that he dropped his weapons. He was hurled across the terrain and knocked down onto his side. Before he could stand up again, Sonic began to slam up and down repeatedly onto him as if he was a basketball being bounced up and down on top of somebody. Every hit caused Swoop to squawk loudly. Breakdown growled viciously and lunged at Sonic. He almost closed his jaws around him but he was stopped by Sally, who had jumped onto his back and stabbed him with her blades again. Crying out in pain, Breakdown reared up and bellowed a thunderous roar that contained all the agony he was feeling. The chipmunk then jumped off, running over to Sonic just as he slammed down on Swoop one last time. The final hit knocked the eagle out completely. Breakdown tried to chase after Sally as she met up with Sonic but the damage done to him was too severe. He couldn't move properly anymore and just slithering was enough to bring great pain to him. He could only watch as the queen called over to her husband.

"That's them done Sonic, let's get Zoe back!" Sally cried.

"You said it Queenie!" Sonic called back to her.

The two ran over to where the energy surge that had led them to S.T.I.N.G.'s quarters had been located. They stopped for a moment and Sally grabbed Nicole from her boot.

"Nicole, can you find an entrance into S.T.I.N.G.'s lair?" the queen asked.

"Certainly Sally." Nicole responded.

There was a brief pause as Nicole ran a diagnostic scan on the ground beneath their feet. The scanner beam swept over the area, pinpointing where the entrance was.

"There is a door hidden under a rock just over there." the holo-lynx responded, an arrow on her screen pointing to where it was.

"I called it, they have a secret door disguised as a rock!" Sonic chuckled, "I doubt we'll get it open that easily though. I bet they have some kind of password or code they use to get it open."

"According to my scans, we are directly above the base right now." Nicole added helpfully, "I suggest you spin-dash into the ground and dig your way in. Sally could cut through the metal below with her blades."

"That's a great idea Nikki, I love it!" the king cried excitedly.

"It'll be quicker than figuring out how to open the door." Sally agreed, "Sonic, be my guest." she added, politely stepping back.

Sonic nodded and jumped up into the air. He spin-dashed straight down into the ground and began carving his way down into the rocky ground like a mole burrowing into the soil. Pebbles and stones were kicked up into the air as Sonic churned through the hard surface. Sally watched with delight. They would be inside the base in no time and they would be reunited with their daughter at last...

Down below, Scorn tail-whipped Zoe across the corridor and sent her sliding painfully across the floor. After she'd spin-dashed him into the wall, the Robian Scorpion had recovered quickly and walloped the princess with his tail. Zoe winced as the slide left a nasty burn on

her arm but she wasn't down for long. Training with Sonic and Sally over the years had made her quite resilient and endurable so she could go on for a while if she needed to. Zoe stood back up, screaming in fright as Scorn came at her. The very sight of him charging towards her was enough to scare anybody to death. Zoe jumped aside as the huge metal tail came stabbing down towards her. Scorn's stab may have missed but his status as a Robian made him very fast at reacting. Missing Zoe only gave him the chance to swing the tail and smack her into the wall. The princess cried out loud as she was hit, almost winded by the slam into the wall behind her. Scorn turned and looked down at her, his expressionless face as terrifying as ever.

"You really shouldn't have escaped your cell Zoe." he muttered. There was no arrogance to his words or his tone of voice. He was completely matter-of-fact, "Now all you're doing is getting yourself needlessly injured. We need you Zoe and I'd rather not cripple you too badly so surrender and spare yourself anymore pain."

"To hell with that!" Zoe spat venomously, "You knocked me out, kidnapped me and left your rattlesnake friend to kill dad! I have every reason to fight you right now!"

She then suddenly swung both fists up and walloped Scorn in the chin, snapping his head backwards and causing him to stagger away from her. The Robian was so taken aback by the punch that he didn't have time to recover as Zoe then jumped up, spun around on the spot and roundhouse kicked her opponent as hard as she could. The heavy blow sent Scorn careening to one side, surprised at how hard his opponent could actually kick. While he was still stunned, Zoe spin-dashed straight into him. She slammed him into a wall once again, the impact so heavy that Zoe ended up denting the wall with Scorn's own body. Surprisingly enough, Scorn seemed more *annoyed* than hurt by the attack! Zoe noticed this grimly as her opponent stood back up as if nothing had happened.

He won't go down that easily...I have to play it smart. the princess thought to herself, *If dad hadn't been so over-protective of me over*

the years, I'd probably be doing a lot better than I currently am at this point!

She raised her fists, daring Scorn to attack her again. The leader of S.T.I.N.G. didn't seem to take her up on her offer for he just stood there for some reason. Zoe soon realized why. He wasn't attacking her right away because he was **preparing** to attack. She watched with fascination as the scorpion claws on Scorn's arms slid down to his wrists and then folded over onto his normal hands. Now he had sharp pincers to attack with instead of his hands. He clinked the tips together, eager to close the claws around his prey.

"I maybe planning to roboticize you Zoe but I don't necessarily need you intact." Scorn growled, "I can roboticize you regardless. I gave you the option to save yourself any grievous injury and you squandered it. Now you get to find out what it's like to have your arms ripped out of your sockets..."

"Big talk for a guy who's head is full of hot air..." Zoe snorted, "Let's see if you can back up your arrogant boasting tin-head!"

She jumped straight up into the air just as Scorn lunged at her with his claw. She actually felt it snap shut just underneath her as it clamped through the air she'd just been stood in. The hedgehog landed on Scorn's arm, giving her the chance to spring over him and land behind him. That was a mistake for Scorn's huge tail swung around and slammed her down into the floor. Zoe cried out, grunting from the impact. She tried to stand back up but Scorn grabbed her with his claw and hoisted her up. His claw was directly around her neck and he squeezed tightly. He was intending to suffocate Zoe but only enough so she would pass out. The princess was useless to him dead. Zoe gagged, trying desperately to open the claw but to no avail. She wasn't strong enough. The princess could already feel the air depleting in her lungs. Black spots were dancing in her vision, she was going to fall unconscious for a third time! No, not again, she'd had enough of falling unconscious! She wasn't going to be beaten now!

In order to get out of Scorn's tight grip, Zoe kicked him repeatedly in the chest. This didn't seem to affect Scorn but then Zoe swung her foot up and kicked him hard in the face. That did it. Scorn staggered backwards from the kick, releasing Zoe. The princess dropped down to the floor and allowed herself a couple of moments to get her breath back before resuming. She massaged her neck as she recovered. Scorn growled angrily and lunged at the teen-hog with his claw. Zoe dodged and grabbed hold of his wrist. Scorn yanked her up off her feet and threw her across the corridor but Zoe landed perfectly on her feet and skidded to a halt. She curled up into a ball and spin-dashed towards Scorn, whizzing through the air like Frisbee. Scorn raised his tail, preparing to smack her away when she got close enough. But Zoe didn't charge straight into him. The spin-dashed instead hurled OVER Scorn and Zoe ricocheted off of the floor straight into his back! The Robian was so caught off-guard that he didn't even have time to cry out in surprise. He was whisked clean off his feet and carried the full length of the corridor straight into the wall at the end. He was slammed into the wall so hard that he ended up briefly stuck in it. As Scorn tried to pull himself free, Zoe took a moment to look around. There were two other corridors nearby. One of them might lead to the way out. She could escape before Scorn got free!

But unfortunately, the scorpion pulled himself out of the massive imprint in the wall and walloped Zoe across the back of her head with his claw. The move disoriented the princess, bringing her down onto her knees as she clutched her head in pain. Then Scorn seized her by both of her arms and hoisted her clean off the floor. Zoe squirmed, trying to get free of the scorpion claws but Scorn's grip was too tight. Then the Eggman worshipper brought her closer and kneed her heavily in the gut. The slam winded Zoe heavily, leaving her coughing and gasping for breath. Then Scorn did it two more times, each blow feeling heavier than the last, before throwing her straight up into the ceiling. Zoe fell back down to the floor, heavily winded and grimacing as pain flared through her body. She massaged her belly, trying to ease the pain. Scorn stood over her, triumphant at last. His prisoner was not going to escape him now.

"You fought admirably young one...I admire that." he purred, "But that kind of fighting prowess should be used to take out the oppressors who murdered the great Doctor Eggman, not to fight alongside them. When I roboticize you, you'll be put to much better use princess."

"No...you won't...make me...your slave!" Zoe grunted.

"Slave? That's a disgusting word." Scorn spat, "We do not desire to enslave the populace. We desire to ENHANCE it. You only see it as slavery because your idiot father was too blind to see the benefits of roboticization and just associated it with oppression."

"Dad told me that...when people got roboticized, they had no...free-will you asshole!" the princess screamed angrily, "How can you dare tell me that isn't enslaving them?!"

"Because we won't be taking away freewill, we're going to let the roboticized populace keep it." the scorpion retorted.

"But what if the populace doesn't WANT to be a robot?!" Zoe snapped, "You're forcing them against their wills to become robots, that's still enslaving them!"

"They'll learn to appreciate it when they stop seeing the world as black-and-white and realize how beneficial to our lives Eggman's ideals are." Scorn snarled.

Zoe had had enough of Scorn talking complete trash and forced herself back onto her feet. She was straining but she was still able to carry on fighting. She raised her fists, waiting for the right moment to spring at her enemy and take him out. Scorn returned the gesture, baring his claws and raising his tail. But then suddenly, before any punches could be thrown, a bright blue laser blade plunged straight through the ceiling! Both opponents looked up in amazement as the blade began to carve a circle in the ceiling. They both stepped back, allowing the chunk of ceiling to fall down to the ground without hitting any of them. Out of the hole above dropped Sally Acorn, who didn't

hesitate in finding out if this was the S.T.I.N.G leader or not. She lashed out at Scorn, clashing blades as he frantically blocked them with his tail. Zoe's face lit up with delight as she watched her mother duel with the evil Robian.

"This is for kidnapping my daughter you monster!" the chipmunk screeched, her face a mask of furious rage.

She began moving so fast that Scorn was having a hard time keeping up with blocking her attacks. Then suddenly, Sally flicked one of her blades up, moving his tail aside and then used her other blade to chop Scorn's legs clean off. The Robian collapsed onto the ground, his legs separated and lying forlornly beside him. To make double sure he was helpless, Sally also severed his tail off with a quick slice of her energy blade. The tail fell away and lay beside the Robian Scorpion like a dead snake. Panting heavily, Sally sheathed her blades and glared at Scorn.

"So I assume you're S.T.I.N.G.'s leader?" she asked coldly.

"I am...Sally Acorn." Scorn growled, "I am Scorn and you'll pay for breaking in and dissecting me like this!"

"The only thing that's happening here is that you're going in a prison cell and doing time for your crimes against the Crown of New Mobotropolis." Sally snapped, "If you want any mercy from me, I suggest you stand down and keep quiet."

"Mom!" Zoe exclaimed, throwing herself into her mother's arms.

"Oh Zoe my baby!" Sally cried delightedly, hugging her back, "I'm so glad you're OK! Sonic told me all about what had happened and I can't tell you how worried I was about you! I feared that S.T.I.N.G. was going to harm you badly..."

"I'm fine mom, really I am." Zoe said softly, "And you said dad told you about this? Does that mean he's still alive?"

"You bet I am kiddo!" came the voice that the young princess had been yearning to hear ever since her capture.

Sonic the Hedgehog himself dropped down from the hole in the ceiling, his face lit up with his trademark cocky smirk. Zoe almost went ecstatic with glee and she quickly jumped straight into Sonic's arms. She grasped him tightly as if she'd just got him back from the dead and didn't want to let go. Sally smiled, happy tears in her eyes over the tender scene before her.

"Ohmigosh, daddy!" she hollered "Thank goodness you're alive! Scorn told me that he left Fang behind to kill you while you was knocked out and I worried you was dead!"

"Nah, it'll take more than a measly gang of Eggman nuts to take ME out." Sonic boasted, nuzzling cheeks with Zoe, "I woke up before she could do anything and tossed her in a cell back home. She's all locked up now. I then told Sally what happened and she figured out where you were being kept so we came here to rescue you!"

"I'm so glad you both came! Thank you so much for coming to save me!" Zoe cried, "I'm so sorry that I got captured dad. Fang got the drop on us and..."

"It's OK Zoe, we weren't prepared for that rattle of hers." Sonic reassured, "We've never met these jokers before so we had no idea what they could do. But now S.T.I.N.G. have been crippled, we can lock them all up and forget all about this nightmare."

"And I heavily doubt they'll ever walk free again." Sally added, directing a cold glare over to Scorn.

But then suddenly, Nicole's handheld computer device started bleeping. The queen glanced down puzzled. Who could possibly be giving her a cool at this moment? She took Nicole off of her boot and opened up the screen.

"Nicole? What is it?" she asked.

"I'm receiving an emergency call from Royal HQ." Nicole replied, "There's been an SOS call back home. Something terrible is happening the message says! Castle Acorn is on fire!"

What, you thought that Sonic and Sally were going to win that easily? You're all nuts if you thought that! =P

So Fang has escaped and Castle Acorn is on fire! And just when the king and queen got their princess back! What will happen next? Tune in next time...

Rising Evil: Chapter 7: Pyrrhic Victory

15 Years Later Chapter 1: Rising Evil

Chapter 7: A Pyrrhic Victory

What should've been a victory for the Royal Family had quickly turned into despair. Sonic and Sally had travelled all the way across Megapolis to stop S.T.I.N.G. and rescue Zoe from their clutches. They had beaten S.T.I.N.G., even having their leader Scorn on the floor at their mercy with his legs severed but they didn't get to enjoy their victory. Nicole had just received a message and had informed Sonic and his family that Castle Acorn was on fire! The news shocked the three so much that for a moment, they could hardly move. They could hardly even speak for that matter. Scorn observed them with interest. He had a feeling he knew what had happened and who had done it. Talk about perfect timing!

Sonic and Sally both snapped out of their shocked state and stared at each other. Then they looked at Zoe, who stared back at them.

"M-m-my home...is on fire?!" Sally shrieked.

"No! Not the castle! Anything but that!" wailed Zoe, "Why did this have to happen! And now of all times?!"

"I dunno Zoe but I think I can guess..." Sonic growled.

He knelt down before the legless Scorn and grabbed hold of his head, jamming his face into his. His eyes were narrowed into a scowl that carried all the hate he could possibly muster up for anybody.

"You had something to do with this! I know it!" Sonic snarled, "Admit it you scrap heap!"

"You are one illogical little hedgehog." Scorn taunted, "How can I have set your home ablaze if I'm all the way over here? I haven't

been anywhere near the castle or even New Mobotropolis as a whole Sonic. So how could I be responsible?"

"You must be!" the king declared angrily, "I mean it seems awfully convenient that Castle Acorn catches fire while we're away from it! What did you do? Plant a bomb and you set it off at a certain time or something?"

"If I had planted a bomb in Castle Acorn Sonic, you wouldn't be here talking to me right now." Scorn retorted, "I would've set it off the moment I'd placed it there and you were inside the castle."

"Sonic, I hate to side with the enemy but...I think he's being serious." Sally put in, "He couldn't have started the fire. But I think I know who did..."

"Who did mom?" Zoe asked curiously.

"Fang probably." the queen announced, her face utterly serious and her tone of voice very matter-of-fact, "She must have broken out of prison somehow and then set the castle alight. There's no other explanation for it."

"But how could Fang possibly escape from the MDC?!" Sonic protested, "Her rattle powers should be useless when placed behind incredibly thick glass! And the glass is shatterproof too! How could she have gotten out?"

"If you want an explanation Sonic, you are mistaken if you think I'll provide one." Scorn sneered, clearly enjoying Sonic's distress, "However, I shall tell only one thing...S.T.I.N.G. has eyes and ears EVERYWHERE. No matter where you go, no matter who you see or who you meet...there will always be somebody working for us. It could be anyone you know...even your own wife."

Sally gasped in disgust. How dare this little cretin even remotely HINT that she was working for S.T.I.N.G.! How could he suggest such a thing?! Sonic clearly wasn't buying it either. He promptly

picked Scorn up and slammed him straight into a wall. The Robian Scorpion didn't even seem fazed by the slam.

"LIAR!" he bellowed, "Nobody in the world would ever work for you bastards! Especially my own family!"

"Yeah, we're not buying your bullshit!" Zoe shouted.

"Then continue to leave in your own fantasy world where law and order actually exist..." Scorn crowed, "I speak only the truth. There are more than just us five in this organization. What you've seen isn't even a fraction of the size and power of S.T.I.N.G. itself. So be aware Sonic...be careful who you trust. Anybody could be working for us. And before you know it, you could be dead before you realize who has sold out their loyalty to the world in favour of loyalty to us instead..."

Those cryptic words were enough to make the whole family stop and think for a moment. They could never have anticipated something like this in their lives. S.T.I.N.G. was not just a five-man band, it was bigger than they expected! And Scorn clearly wasn't kidding around with his claims either. There was no hint of a lie, a joke or anything resembling manipulation. He was being deathly serious. It also made sense as to how Fang escaped. They must have an inside agent who broke the rattlesnake out and led to Castle Acorn being set ablaze!

"Hate to say it Sal...but I think Scorn's not kidding around." Sonic muttered.

"That's what makes it worse..." Sally sighed, "Either way, we must get home if we have any chance of saving the castle!"

"But what about Scorn?!" Zoe protested, "We can't just let S.T.I.N.G. get away! We've gotta arrest them!"

"We don't have time! If we just focus on throwing these guys in a cell, there might be nothing left of Castle Acorn to save." the king

noted, "And believe me, I really, REALLY don't wanna let these guys go! I wanna arrest them as badly as you do Zoe!"

"But as is, we've gotta get home and not only save Castle Acorn, but make sure nobody else gets hurt too." Sally sighed, "If most of the Royal Fighters hadn't moved out of the city to live their own lives, this wouldn't be much of a problem..." she added.

Sonic nodded agreeably. Over the fifteen years that had gone by, many of the New Mobotropolis Royal Fighters, while still remaining as members of the team, were no longer living in the city. Many had chosen to live elsewhere to start their own lives and even start their own families. Only very few still remained in the city itself, not enough to deal with Castle Acorn. So as much as they didn't want to let S.T.I.N.G. off the hook, the Royal Family had no choice. New Mobotropolis needed them now and they couldn't ignore the problem. Full of anger, Sonic pounded the wall in fury and then kicked Scorn in the head, knocking him down onto his side.

"You're off the hook for now Scorn!" Sonic snarled, "But don't you get comfy. We'll be back for you...and there will be no distractions the next time we meet! You're gonna be rusting in a prison cell next time I get you!"

"When you're quite finished wasting your breath Sonic, don't you have a home that needs saving?" Scorn retorted.

It was clear that Scorn only said that to torment the king but Sonic knew that he was only saying what was true. So without wasting anymore time, Sonic cupped his hands together and gave Sally a leg up so she could climb up through the hole she'd cut in order to get inside the base. As soon as Sally disappeared up the hole, he gave Zoe a leg up so she could climb up to. As his daughter ascended, Sonic shot one last glare over at Scorn as if determined to make him remember it.

"I'm coming back for you...and I ain't kidding about it." he warned.

"I look forward to our next encounter..." Scorn purred, more amused than intimidated by the threat.

Disgusted at Scorn's lack of emotion, Sonic looked up at the hole in the ceiling and leapt up. He grabbed hold of the edges of the hole and pulled himself up, climbing after his two girls. As soon as the king was up and out of sight, Scorn put a clawed, metal finger to the side of his head.

"Swoop, Breakdown, Razoul, return to base." he commanded, "Let the king and female accomplices go. We'll leave them to drown in paranoia for a while. And also, I require repairs."

"Ungh...we'll be there shortly Scorn." came the voice of a very groggy sounding Swoop.

He, Breakdown and Razoul had just come to after being knocked out earlier. Now they were awake, Scorn could just patiently wait for them to return and for Swoop to fix his legs and tail. He allowed himself a moment to chuckle a rather sinister, menacing chuckle more to himself than anybody. It was one of those rare moments Scorn ever showed signs of joy or delight in anything.

"The seed of doubt has been sown...now the heroes will tear themselves apart with their paranoia, wondering who's friend or foe...a perfect distraction from the greater plan. They'll not know what's coming until it's too late...Project: Robius will be a success and Eggman's legacy will finally come to fruition..."

It didn't take long for Sonic and his family to return home. Sonic and Zoe were fast runners, that much was certain but it seemed that when there was an emergency, they managed to go just that little bit faster. It was something that happens in everybody when the situation gets very dire, a rush of adrenaline that manages to make you operate much faster and more urgently when something requires your presence very quickly. Sonic had no idea how much of Castle Acorn would be left by the time he got home but he prayed

that they'd be able to save enough of it so that they wouldn't have to replace much.

As the Royal Family entered through the gates of New Mobotropolis, they were met instantly with a horrible sight. There, up on the hill, was Castle Acorn, blazing away like Guy Fawkes on Bonfire Night. The flames were huge, almost entirely consuming the building from the inside out. The flames were so large that no matter where you stood in New Mobotropolis, you would see them clearly. How Fang started this fire they had no idea but the king, queen and princess knew that this was a lot bigger than they could've expected.

There were fire fighters on the scene attacking the flames with their water pipes. Soldiers working for the R.F.S. and policemen had formed a protective barrier spanning all around the bottom of the hill to keep anybody away from the castle while the firefighters did their job. Water sprayed all over, trying to put out the flames. But despite their best efforts, they were fighting a badly losing battle. The inferno was much too big to be contained so easily. It was almost like trying to fight off a pack of wolves. You can only handle so much before your attempts become in vain.

There was another danger too. The flames were dangerously close to the ground. The grass was dry and if the flames managed to reach them, the fire could easily spread and start blazing down the hill towards all the nearby houses. The fire could potentially damage a large portion of New Mobotropolis if not contained very soon. Some of the fire fighters were spraying water at the grass to make it wet so the fire couldn't spread but they couldn't keep their focus on only the grass as the fire continued to consume Castle Acorn. They had to keep spraying the castle too.

Sonic, Sally and Zoe ran up towards the barrier, pushing through the crowd to get up to their home. One of the policemen noticed the Royal Family and didn't once hesitate to let them pass. If anybody could save the day now, it was them. He stepped aside and allowed the trio to approach their blazing home. Seeing the last remaining

building of Old Mobotropolis up in smoke was enough to make Sally's eyes well up with tears.

"No...my home!" she wailed, "How could we have allowed this to happen?!"

"Let's hope we can save enough of it to restore it to its former glory." Sonic muttered, "Zoe, are you ready?"

"I hope I am..." the princess said nervously, "I've never put out a fire before!"

She glanced over at the flaming castle, completely intimidated by the sheer size and scale of the fire. Sonic put his hands on her shoulders to try and ease her nerves.

"You can do it kiddo, trust me." the king said warmly, "Just remember the Sonic Tornado I taught ya. That's all we need to put out this fire!"

"You sure?"

"Positive! You're my daughter and I taught you everything I know! You can do it!"

Zoe was still uncertain that she could do this. This whole thing was very new to her. Sonic had sheltered her for so much of her life that she had never been exposed to situations like this. Could she put out the fire? Her father had a lot of faith in her so he seemed convinced. And she did want to be like her dad so maybe this was her chance to prove it. No, she couldn't let Sonic down! She would do it! Zoe managed to put a smile on her face as she and her dad fist-bumped.

"Let's save our castle dad!" she cried.

"That's my girl!" Sonic replied approvingly.

Sally beamed. At long last she'd get to watch her husband and daughter working together to save the day! How she had dreamed of this moment since Zoe's birth! She stood by and watched as the two

hedgehogs began to sprint around in a circle, slowly but steadily picking up speed. The fire fighters noticed what was happening and were quick to stop what they were doing so their king and princess could carry on. They were the ones that could put out the fire and they knew it.

Father and daughter both ran at the same speed, simultaneously getting faster and faster the more they ran. The world became a blur as their speed continued to increase. As they ran around in this continuous circle, a huge wind was beginning to whip up in the centre. The flames were beginning to wave back and forth wildly as the wind swirled around. The Sonic Tornado was beginning to form and with two supersonic hedgehogs running together to create it, the tornado began to grow in size and gradually put out the fire. A huge blue and brown funnel of wind gradually rose up and up, surrounding the castle from all sides. The wind was getting so ferocious that the flames had no chance against it. It was now their turn to fight a losing battle. Zoe was constantly whooping excitedly as the tornado grew. This was the most exciting thing she had ever done. The populace of the city down below watched in awe, impressed with what was happening. They also began to cheer for their king and princess, amazed with how quickly they were beginning to put out the flames.

As the tornado swept around the castle, the flames begin to shrink inside, almost as if it was a film on rewind. Despite the flames getting smaller, Sonic and Zoe didn't stop. They had to keep going until the flames were completely extinguished for if there was even the smallest flame still lingering, it could start up again. They kept the Sonic Tornado going for a couple of minutes, the flames shrinking away the longer it kept up. Then finally, the fire disappeared completely, leaving nothing more than the charred remains of the very building they had been consuming.

Unknown to anybody, Fang and Ramirez had been watching the whole scene from behind a house and had been impressed with how the king had managed to put out the fire. They had known Sonic was

good, but they hadn't known he was this good. If they ever fought him again, they made a mental note to make sure Sonic and Zoe never got the chance to use this attack on them. Despite the fire being put out, they were still grinning wickedly to themselves. The damage had been done and that was all that mattered to them. Sonic would focus on rebuilding his home, not them. This in turn would allow S.T.I.N.G. to continue operating behind the scenes and leave the populace unprepared for their eventual attack.

"That fire bomb of yours worked like a charm Ramirez." Fang purred, "There's barely anything left of Castle Acorn now."

"Good. Those dictators deserve what they've gotten." the chameleon spat, "They forced their views onto us and branded Eggman a villain when his ways are the right ways so we'll take away what's dear to them. That'll serve them right for being the disgusting, hypocritical fascists they are!"

"You sure said it Rami." Fang said, stroking his cheek, "Now then, shall we flee this place and get back to Scorn?"

"You go." Ramirez ordered, "I'll stay here for a moment and add insult to injury for his majesty before rejoining you..."

He winked at his love interest as he turned the dials on his holographic emitter and just like magic, his appearance changed from that of an Eggman fanatic to a policeman. He didn't turn into the mole he had been pretending to be before killing Balto for he knew the police would spell him out as the spy that had caused this to happen. He was instead a Mobian iguana in a police uniform. There had been a Mobian iguana on the force but he was now lying dead on the other side of the wall around the city. Ramirez and Fang had killed him so the former could disguise himself as him without anyone suspecting him.

Fang grinned and gave Ramirez a quick kiss on the cheek before running off towards a hover saucer that was parked nearby. It belonged to one of the citizens but she didn't care. She jumped into

it, started it up and sped off out through the gates, heading back to the Northern Boarder of Megapolis to get back to S.T.I.N.G. Ramirez waved her off and then ran over to the hilltop so he could speak to Sonic.

Up on the hill, the Sonic Tornado had died away now that the two hedgehogs had stopped running. The fire was out and everybody was safe. Sonic and Zoe stood before their destroyed home, catching their breath. For the moment, the castle went on ignored as they both smiled at each other.

"That was awesome!" Zoe panted, "Whew...didn't think I could do it!"

"I told ya you could, and you did it. You helped me to put out the fire." Sonic complimented, "You really are just like your old man after all Zoe."

That compliment made Zoe feel proud of herself. She had done it, she'd proven her father that she could be like him at last. Maybe now he'd be less protective of her and let her be what she'd always wanted to be. Sally ran over to her husband and child and hugged them both, proud of the two for what they'd done.

"You were both incredible out there." the queen said softly, "You worked together brilliantly and put out the fire! I couldn't be more proud of you two."

"Thanks mom." Zoe replied modestly.

"Just doing what I do best Sal." Sonic said, "Though how much did we save of our castle?" he suddenly asked as if remembering what had just happened.

"Not much..." Sally murmured.

The trio looked over at what remained of their opulent home. Castle Acorn, the only building to have survived the destruction of Old Mobotropolis and the entire Eggman war...and this was what it had

been reduced to. Nothing more than a blackened, hollow, charred shell of its former self. The entire interior of the castle had been destroyed with nothing left but the bottom floor. There was barely any furniture that remained intact, most of it reduced to black splinters of wood. The exterior was more intact but not by a whole lot. The brick work had mostly blackened with only a few splodges of its actual colour remaining. The roof had caved in completely, the tiles all lying in pieces on the floor. There was no chance that this castle could possibly be fixed now. It had been totally ravaged, completely beyond repair. All it could do now was stand there like the Ghost of Death itself watching over the world and wondering who to claim next with his vicious scythe. Seeing the sight before them made the heroes fall into despair. They had saved their home for nothing. This wasn't a victory of any kind. In a sense, they hadn't even "saved" it.

"I can't believe it...my home...it's all gone!" Sally whimpered, her eyes trickling with tears.

"We did all we could to put out the fire, and it wasn't enough!" Zoe wailed, falling to her knees, "We failed!"

"And all because S.T.I.N.G. was smarter than us..." Sonic growled.

He was very conflicted with his emotions. He wasn't sure if he wanted to cry or just kick something in rage. He was feeling a mixture of sadness and anger, both emotions tearing away at him as they welled up inside. He stood still for a moment, listening to his wife break down into floods of tears. This was a bigger loss for her than it was for him or Zoe. She would never be able to accept this defeat and let go of Castle Acorn's destruction. How it hurt him to see his wife in so much despair. Then suddenly, he felt somebody put a hand on his shoulder. He turned around and saw that an iguana policeman was standing before him. He recognized the officer and was relieved to see him. With Scorn's cryptic words still burning in his mind, he could do with all the comrades he knew for a fact were still loyal to him.

"Hey Officer Nova." he said grimly.

"Greetings your majesty." Officer Nova replied, "I am most sorry for your loss sire. It's a terrible tragedy, it really is, to lose your home like this..."

"Was anybody killed in the fire?" Sonic asked, the thought just occurring to him.

"Nobody was killed thank goodness." Nova answered, "They evacuated as the flames began spreading."

Sonic let out a sigh of relief. Finally, some good news to lighten the mood!

"Man am I glad to hear that..." he said, "How did the fire start anyway? I'm guessing Fang did it but how did she get out of her cell?"

"She provoked Balto into entering the cell and attacking her. Then one of our own, Officer Moe the Mole, turned out to be working for S.T.I.N.G. and shot him dead, allowing her to escape." Nova explained, "He's a S.T.I.N.G. agent called Ramirez the Chameleon and he seems to have a holographic emitter for he just turned something on his wrist and his appearance changed. Once he broke Fang out, she knocked us out with her rattle and when we came to...Castle Acorn was ablaze. We assume it's some kind of fire bomb but we'll begin investigating the cause of it sooner or later to confirm it."

Sonic took in what Nova had said and turned the words over in his head. So Scorn WASN'T lying after all! S.T.I.N.G. had eyes and ears everywhere he had said, and now New Mobotropolis had become a victim of one of their eyes and ears. Well never again! S.T.I.N.G. would never get the drop on him like this next time! He'd be on the lookout for any agents working for the evil organization and he'd flush them out if it took him for the rest of his life to do so! This "Ramirez" fellow would never fool him or his friends again.

"Thanks ever so much for your information officer." Sonic thanked, "It's been very helpful. We'll keep a look out for anybody wearing a holographic emitter and expose Ramirez if he tries masquerading around here again. When we catch him, he's going in a cell and so will anybody else working for S.T.I.N.G.!"

"I agree sire, I'll have all my men on the lookout immediately." the iguana officer promised.

"That's good. You can get back to your work now Nova, I...I just need a moment alone with my family." the king murmured, looking sadly over at his grieving wife.

"Absolutely sir." Nova nodded, turning away and walking back down the hill.

As he left, Ramirez smiled to himself. How fun it was to be talking to Sonic, completely fooling him into thinking he was talking to Officer Nova instead! It made him smile to think that Sonic was vowing to arrest S.T.I.N.G. and anybody working for them and yet he had unknowingly been talking directly to one of them right now! He was going to enjoy doing this whenever he got the opportunity to do so. While no one was looking, Ramirez disappeared behind a building and changed back to his normal self. Then he found a nearby police cruiser, got inside it and started it up. He drove towards the gates, intending to head back to base. To anybody who saw him, they wouldn't be seeing this as somebody making a getaway, they'd see it as a police officer going off to hunt down S.T.I.N.G. Satisfied with everything he had done and his conversation with Sonic, Ramirez passed through the gates and headed off back home to S.T.I.N.G.'s lair...

Later on, the crowd had silently disappeared away from the scene, leaving the remains of Castle Acorn to decay like the pages of an old book. Police and investigators were probing the wreckage to try and find out what had caused the fire to begin with. They know who did it but they needed to find out how as it could be useful information to

Sonic and the Royal Fighters. If they knew what S.T.I.N.G. was capable of and what weapons they had, they could prepare for their next encounter with them.

Sonic, Sally and Zoe had left the sight, sitting in Royal HQ as they took in everything that had happened today. What had started as a simple day out to try and build the bond between father and daughter had quickly gone south, and in a way nobody could've imagined. How could a peaceful day out at the Forest of Chao lead to the kidnapping of Zoe and the destruction of Castle Acorn?! Seventeen years of peace and it had all shattered in just a few hours of a single day. Nobody in the world could've anticipated such a turnout. Sonic had thought that Eggman's presence was gone and the world would be at peace. Now he realized he couldn't have been more wrong.

As the three lounged on the sofa of the recreation room, Nicole appeared before them in her holographic form. The holo-lynx could feel the sorrow that her friends were feeling now. If only she could've called them earlier and maybe they might have had a chance of saving the castle.

"I have sent the message now." Nicole explained, "Every Royal Fighter group in the world will now know of S.T.I.N.G.'s presence and be on the alert. They won't let them catch them by surprise as they did to us."

"Thank you Nicole." said Sally, "With any luck, they'll arrest S.T.I.N.G. and put a stop to their threat unlike us."

"I just can't believe they played as all for suckers!" Sonic ranted, clenching his fists, "I mean I captured Fang and brought her home and instead of simply ending their terror before it can begin, it just made things worse! They were ahead of us the whole time!"

"Well we have been at peace for 17 Years Sonic so we were bound to be unprepared for such an assault." Sally muttered, "Also we have no idea how long S.T.I.N.G. has been operating for. They could've been spending the fifteen years we've spent peacefully just

formulating their group and planning everything. There was literally no chance of us being prepared for them."

"And that in turn makes them thrice the threat Eggman ever was..." Nicole agreed, "We thought Eggman was well and truly dead once Finitevus killed him seventeen years ago...instead, he's pretty much come back in the form of five fanatics with delusions that he's in the right and we were wrong to rebel against him."

"Yeah, it's almost like the fat bastard's come back from the dead." Sonic sighed, "Only this time, he's a lot smarter and more menacing than before. I mean Scorn and his cronies make Eggman himself look like a chump!"

"Yeah...from the stories you've told me, Eggman never played you like these guys have done." Zoe muttered, looking very sullen, "And he also never succeeded in destroying Castle Acorn too. And it's all my fault that this happened too!"

She suddenly began to wail, breaking down into tears again. It was as if a switch had been thrown inside her and her mood had very suddenly changed from grim to uncontrollably sobbing. Sally turned to face her daughter and put her arms around her to try and settle her down.

"Oh Zoe honey, don't act like that..." she said calmly.

"NO!" the princess snapped, "Don't you tell me that crap mom! It was my fault! Every damn bit of what happened today is my fault! If I didn't get captured than you two wouldn't have had to leave home to save me and leave Castle Acorn vulnerable! It's my fault we're homeless and do you know why?"

She then shot an accusing glare over to Sonic.

"Because of you dad!" she shouted.

Sonic recoiled in shock. He was outraged.

"What?! WHAT?! Zoe the Hedgehog, how is it possibly my fault that this happened?!" Sonic demanded angrily.

"Because you were too protective of me!" snapped Zoe, "If you weren't so over-protective of me and actually let me have my own space then maybe I might've been better prepared to take on S.T.I.N.G. and thus, avoid all of this shit that we've gone through! So you're every bit at fault as I am dad!"

"How dare you! Zoe, I do not like this attitude of yours!" Sonic growled, "You do not ever speak to your father like that! I did what I did because I love you and you dare to say I'm at fault for it?!"

"Yes you damn well are!" the teen-hog retorted, "You shouldn't have been sheltering me so much and if you hadn't, I wouldn't have gotten captured and caused this to happen!"

"You don't know that Zoe! None of us do! Even if I hadn't over-parented you, all this still could've happened! I'm not to blame for any of this!"

"YES YOU ARE DAD! NOW GROW THE FUCK UP AND ADMIT IT ALREADY!"

"Will you two please stop bickering!" Sally bellowed, standing between the two to stop them from getting to each other.

"Not until dad admits that this is his fault as well!" Zoe retorted.

"Zoe if you don't stop right this second then so help me I'm gonna..." Sonic began.

"What? Punish me? Send me to my room? I DON'T HAVE A ROOM ANYMORE!" Zoe shouted, "And why is that?! Because of my inexperience caused by your over-protectiveness!"

Then suddenly, before the argument could get any worse, Zoe doubled-over in agony and let out a howl of pain as she fell onto her

knees. She was clutching her belly, her face contorting with pain. The robo-roach that had inserted itself into her body was causing her stomach to ache but she didn't know this. All Zoe could wonder was why her stomach was suddenly hurting. Sonic and Sally gasped and gathered around the princess. Sonic's anger had dissipated and he only had concern etched on his face.

"Zoe, what's wrong?" Sally asked worriedly.

"Ungh...I'm fine, really!" Zoe grunted, "Just a stomach-ache that's all...ow it hurts...!" she clutched it tightly as the pain flared through her.

"Is she OK Nicole?" Sonic asked, "She never usually gets tummy pains, what's wrong with her?"

Nicole took a moment to scan Zoe for any signs of ill health. Two green beams leapt out of her eyes and swept over Zoe. In seconds, her scan had been completed. She didn't detect the bug for Swoop had designed it to be untraceable.

"She doesn't seem to be in any ill health or anything." Nicole explained, "It's just stress that's all. She'll be fine."

"Thank goodness for that." Sally sighed, "Zoe, this is why we warned you about losing your temper. It just hurts you like it's done now."

"I know, I'm sorry mom." Zoe said, looking down at the floor while tenderly rubbing her tummy, "It's just...it's just..." she sighed for a moment before continuing, "...today's been total crap and I can't help but get a little stressed. It's so hard to take everything in and, ya know...accept it right?"

"I'm an adult Zoe and I'm still having trouble accepting what's happened." Sonic said gently, stroking Zoe's back to comfort her, "But we can't just be mad at each other, not right now. We can't let S.T.I.N.G. think we're vulnerable. But still, we really need to get away from here for a while. Like a small vacation y'know?"

"I agree. It'll do us well to get away from the stress for a while." Sally concurred, "We've got a nice place in Soleanna we can stay in for a while, just to help us get back on our feet and cool down so we're ready for S.T.I.N.G.'s next move."

"I'm not one to agree with such an idea but sometimes, even a hedgehog like myself has to just slow down for a minute." Sonic nodded, "Nicole, tell the Duke and Duchess of Soleanna that we'll be coming over to their turf for a few days. And tell them why we're coming too, they need to know about S.T.I.N.G. as well."

"A very logical idea Sonic." Nicole said approvingly, "I'll send the message immediately."

She then de-materialized into a cluster of pixels, leaving the Royal Family alone to settle down with each other. Just a little peace and their own company were what they most needed at this point. For a moment, father, mother and daughter all cuddled up together, not wanting to let go of each other for a long time.

"I'm sorry I got mad and said all those terrible things dad..." Zoe said softly, "I just got too emotional. I'm really, really sorry."

"It's OK kiddo." Sonic replied gently, "I was as bad-tempered as you were back when I was young. And I do think that you're right in some way. Maybe if I hadn't been so over protective of you, this could've been avoided. But we'll never know..." he added grimly, "However, I can promise you right now Zoe that this will never happen again. No more sheltering you, this time, I let you have your freedom and train you as best as I can."

"As best as WE can you mean." Sally corrected, "We'll train you to the best of your ability Zoe and next time you face S.T.I.N.G., you'll be ready for them."

"And we'll kick their butts and make them pay for their crimes!" Zoe declared, her face brightening up, "Boy are they gonna be sorry they messed with us!"

"Just like me and your mother made Eggman sorry he messed with us Zoe!" Sonic agreed.

The three Mobians all shared a laugh among them. As despairing as things we now, they had managed to find that little ray of sunshine that was making things seem less despairing to them. For now, they were feeling more cheerful and with any luck, their happiness would be allowed to continue and lead back to peace returning to Mobius.

But with the bug still inside Zoe and Project: Robius coming to fruition, that happiness still seemed far, far away...

And thus we conclude "Rising Evil". I hope you liked the first story-arc this series has to offer. ^^

Next time, Tails and Cosmo get their own story-arc along with Ruben and Sora as we get invited to a* "Double Wedding" *!

Be sure to tune in next time as the 15 Years Later saga continues with its second story-arc next time. See you then readers! ^^

Mini Chapter: The Elite Twelve Part 1

15 Years Later Mini Chapter: The Elite Twelve Part 1

The Creepy One

A day had passed since S.T.I.N.G.'s semi-victory against Sonic, Sally and Zoe. For the first time since the group had been founded, they had come out to show their hand against the Royal Family. It had ended with Zoe being bugged, something that would come into play when Project: Robius reached its climax, and Castle Acorn being destroyed. The Royal Family had left New Mobotropolis to stay at Soleanna for the time being to deal with the stress of the events that had passed. Scorn knew this and was already planning something big to take advantage of the situation. That was how Scorn worked; he always looked for a way to take advantage of what happened in life, no matter how small.

For now, he was on his way to a special room in his base. This room was marked with the word "Private" above the door. The Robian Scorpion didn't have to abide to that label though. He had every right to be in this private room. So he let himself in and walked up to a glass window just ahead of him. This window was the reason why this room was marked "Private". It was a testing room for experiments for he and Fang to overlook. Being the leaders of S.T.I.N.G., it was their duty to overlook experiments that needed testing and nothing left the room without their approval. If they disapproved, the experiment would be destroyed and reduced to atoms.

Scorn approached the window and peered through it. There was a room on the other side of the window, the very place where experiments were observed, tested and reviewed. Today's experiment was a very, very special case. For this was not the making of a new machine or a new device. This was the testing…of an artificially created Mobian. Scorn considered making robots more

fun but had decided to try out this experiment just to see how it worked. After all, it just gave him a new Mobian to roboticize. Plus being a biogenetically made Mobian meant that he had a desperately loyal minion to work with.

He was watching the biogenetically made Mobian now. The Mobian in question was a girl, and a very unusual Mobian too. She was a leech, a rare species on Mobius. The leech girl was orange with black segmented plating on the top of her head, her back and the top of her tail. She had red eyes and red stingers that could easily pass off as dreadlocks to anybody who met this girl. Being a leech, she had fangs and she dressed in a brown dress with black boots and fingerless gloves. The outfit had a Dr. Eggman theme going on, almost making her look like some sort of Eggman cosplayer. It was appropriate that she had that theme in her clothes, for S.T.I.N.G. wanted to stress the point that they worshipped Eggman by making their best minions dress like him.

The Mobian leech was unaware that Scorn was watching her at the moment. She was instead sitting on the floor and grooming a female Mobian dog. The dog had been stripped of her clothes and had a leash attached to a collar around her neck. She had a distant, unfocused look accompanied by lifeless grey eyes and she appeared to have some kind of mark on her shoulder. The mark had been left there when the leech had bitten her. The leech appeared to be treating her like a Mobini dog and not a Mobian. She was scratching her ears and patting her head like an owner with an actual dog.

"Who's a good doggy little Fifi? You are, yes you are!" the leech squealed excitedly.

The Mobian dog didn't seem to object to this treatment, though the leech knew full well that deep inside, it was begging to be freed from the prison that its own consciousness had become thanks to her. The leech then made the Mobian roll over onto her back so she could give it a tummy tickle.

"You're such a good girl!" the genetically, created girl cried, "You're getting big bones as a reward for your behaviour!"

The Mobian only barked like a normal dog would do. Then the leech turned away from the dog and looked over at another Mobian girl. This one was a salamander and a very attractive looking one at that. She had been bitten by the leech too and subjected to what appeared to be mind control, just like the Mobian dog. The salamander wasn't being treated as a pet though, but as a doll, a living life-sized doll. The leech girl had styled the woman's hair, dressed her up and everything. And thanks to her influence, the salamander had no control or any way of resisting this humiliating treatment.

"And you look utterly gorgeous today Suzie-Wuzie!" the Mobian leech exclaimed, "Your hair is wonderful now it's been freshly combed and shampooed! And your dress…man I could pinch your cheeks you look so adorable!"

She then proceeded to do just that. Deep inside, the salamander was crying and begging for this humiliation and violation of her to stop.

"Would you care for some tea Suzie-Wuzie?" the leech girl asked, "Of course you do, you must be parched! Drink up, its mommy's special recipe!"

She then picked up a teapot, an actual teapot and not a toy like what many children would play with, and poured a cup of tea for her doll. Thanks to her influence, "Suzie-Wuzie" sipped some of it. The leech poured some for herself and sniffed, enjoying the scent.

"Aaah, that's what I call good tea S.W." she said gleefully, "You like it? What am I asking your opinion for! I know what it is already! You think yes, yes, yes! You love everything mommy does!"

Scorn had taken all of this in with complete and utter distaste. Seriously, this is what the experiment had resulted in? Creating a

great big woman-child who saw the world through the eyes of a toddler?! If this girl wasn't useful to his cause, he would be humiliated to admit he'd created her. Shaking his head, Scorn looked down at a nearby tape-recorder that was on a shelf next to where he was standing and he pressed the record button. The tape reels began to turn and Scorn spoke down at the machine as the recording began.

"S.T.I.N.G. Logs Entry 225. Chief of Experiment: Scorn the Scorpion. Co-Chief of Experiment: Fang the Rattlesnake." he said.

He spoke and sounded like a scientist giving an evaluation at a science fair.

"Subject: Biogenetically created Mobian. Codename: Lyra the Leech.

History of project: When going through the archives of Dr. Eggman, a feat made possible by finding the Death Egg's computer databanks when scouring the wreckage of the doomed vessel, we found some unused plans for a biogenetic creation. We took it upon ourselves to carry out this idea to satisfy scientific curiosities and to create a minion loyal to us and only us. It helps to have at least ONE loyal minion who won't be vulnerable to the possibility of switching sides.

Evaluation: Subject appears to display a child-like mentality, playing with her victims as if they were toys that a child would desire. She either makes her victims her pets or her "dollies". She achieves this by stinging them with her stingers and injecting some kind of venom into the victim that causes they to fall under mind-control. She has to continuously pump them full of the stuff or her control wears off and the victim returns to normal. Very useful for catching soon-to-be-Robians.

The child-like mentality is not acceptable though. It is an anomaly in what is otherwise a pretty satisfactory experiment. The subject is loyal to us and only us and is rather easily satisfied when she desires something. The pros outweigh the cons though so we're going to keep her alive. Lyra the Leech will be very beneficial to our

cause, especially since we get to roboticize anybody she doesn't want to play with anymore. She will be great edition to the Elite Eleven, a group I hope to expand to twelve to even things out. She can be the eleventh member, leaving only the twelfth to recruit. I'll test her capabilities by…"

"Hey daddy, who are you talking to?"

Scorn looked up and gasped, startled. Lyra had heard him, only vaguely given the thick glass muffled his words and she wasn't too close to the window to make him out clearly, and was now pressing her face against the window. She seemed innocent enough but Scorn was crept out by this behaviour. Lyra as a whole was pretty creepy. So Lyra could hear him more clearly, Scorn opened the window.

"Um…nobody Lyra." the Robian said feebly.

"You're talking to somebody daddy, I know you are!" the artificially-created specimen snapped.

"I'm not talking to anybody Lyra." Scorn insisted.

"Yes you are! I just heard ya chatting, why ya lying?" Lyra demanded, "Lemme guess…the voices in your head right? You're talking to yourself right?"

"If you want to put it that way…" Scorn muttered under his breath.

"Didn't ya know that talking to yourself is a sign of madness?" the leech giggled teasingly, "Not that I care. Sanity is overrated! Eee, hee, hee, hee! You're like me daddy, you embrace the madness! I really am your daughter aren't I?"

"You're…a valuable comrade." Scorn said, carefully choosing his words, "Now Lyra, please go back to your dollies. Daddy's busy right now."

"OK!" Lyra piped, running back over to her victims.

As soon as she went away from the window, Scorn closed it and he looked back down at the tape recorder. He'd make sure to edit out the part where Lyra interrupted him later.

"Ahem…one bothersome thing about putting up with the subject is that she has…a parental attachment to me and Fang, believing us to be her parents." he continued, sounding annoyed he was admitting this. "I do not desire children, nor do I see her as my own. She is a liability and nothing more. As for testing her capabilities, I'll send her on a mission to Soleanna with Akhlut the Orca, one of my Elite Eleven, to terminate Sonic the Hedgehog once and for all. Her mission will be to capture any of the Royal Fighters she comes across. Her main target will be females so hopefully, she'll have the queen and princess coming our way.

I shall talk of her performance in the field in the next log entry. This is Scorn out."

He switched off the recorder, stopping the tape. He looked up again and watched as Lyra was sipping tea with the salamander girl who had become her dolly. The leech girl looked a little sad, though Scorn wasn't sure if the emotion was genuine or not.

"Daddy doesn't seem to like me much Suzie-Wuzie." Lyra mused, "True he treats me with dollies and pets like you and Fifi but he never seems to want to be around me. It's like…I scare him ya know?"

Suzie-Wuzie nodded, not because she agreed with Lyra but because the blood-sucking Mobian had ordered her to.

"That must be the case, I mean why else would he keep me locked up in this boring-ass room?!" the genetic creation moaned, "It's like he wants to isolate me from everybody! How can I be a good S.T.I.N.G. ally if I'm stuck in here with nothing to do until daddy or mommy gives me something to play with?!"

She frowned, clearly annoyed with her current position and status in life. How she longed to do something exciting and give Scorn a reason to admire him! It'd be almost as fun as playing with her "dollies".

"I want to make daddy proud, make him appreciate me!" Lyra cried out, excitedly rather than sadly, "I'll show him, I'll be his bestest, most awesomest comrade ever! I'll be S.T.I.N.G.'s best ally and daddy will be very proud of me! Whee, hee, hee, hee! Yes he will!"

That made the roboticized scorpion put a metal claw to his lips in thought. How wonderful it was to see that Lyra was so loyal to him. He supposed he couldn't be too embarrassed over how she'd turned out. Better a loyal woman-child than a disloyal one. Yes…Lyra would be perfect as part of the Elite Eleven! His mind was made up, he would recruit Lyra now and the resulting recruitment would give her more reasons to remain loyal to him. It was important to give people a reason to remain loyal to you and he knew it.

Scorn opened the window up again, surprising Lyra since he never usually did this unless she was the one stirring up a conversation. The leech got up to her feet and toddled over to the S.T.I.N.G. leader. She could feel a twinge of excitement in her belly as she approached. Could this be what she had been hoping for at last?

"Yes daddy? What is it?" she asked sweetly.

"I've been observing you for quite a while." Scorn exposited, his tone very matter-of-fact, "And I must say, I've been rather impressed with your abilities Lyra. Your use of semi-mind control and the fact you crave blood, something that could weaken our enemies should you bite them, make you a valuable asset to our cause."

Lyra was stunned. Scorn…was COMPLIMENTING her?! And even saying she was…useful to him?! The leech had assumed that Scorn didn't give two thoughts about her but it seemed he was giving evidence to the contrary. Maybe he did appreciate her after all.

"You…you really think so?!" Lyra gasped, her eyes wide and full of awe.

"I'm your father, technically speaking Lyra." the robo-arachnid noted, "Would I ever lie to you?"

"No daddy, you wouldn't." Lyra said, bouncing up and down, "So you think I'm valuable to your plan to kill Sonic for killing the great and glorious Eggman and make his buddies robots?"

"I do indeed child." Scorn purred, "In fact, I value your skills so much that I'm going to appoint you as the official eleventh member of our newest group, the Elite Eleven. Like the other members, you'll have your own region of land to control. With that being promised to you, think of what's in store for you…all the dollies and blood you can have! It'll be a dream come true for you my little scientific miracle…"

The sweet-talking made Scorn feel sick for he hated talking in such a way. But he supposed it suited Lyra given she had a childish personality and saw him as a dad. As for the Mobian bloodsucker, she was standing very still, clearly unable to believe what she'd just heard. She was in the Elite Eleven and would get her own land to control?! This was the best present she could ever ask for! The leech squealed with delight, skipping around the room as if she'd just discovered that she'd won the lottery. She skipped around with her dolly and pet, making them join in with the celebrating.

Scorn just watched her coldly. If he had a face, he would be grinning. Things would change for the better when Project: Robius was complete and Lyra was among the Robians. No more of this childish nonsense! Only loyalty and obedience. Definitely an upgrade to this behaviour of Lyra's.

"OH THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU!" Lyra shrieked, still skipping around, "THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE! And to think it's only been a week since I was born…so I've got plenty of time to top that. THANK YOU SO MUCH DADDY!" she cried, reaching through the open window and hugging her father figure.

"Anything for you Lyra." Scorn said deviously, "Now then my child, listen carefully. I have your first mission planned out for you…"

To be continued…

This is the first of many mini-chapters that will set up other stories down the line.

So who are the Elite Eleven? And who will Scorn recruit to be the twelfth member he wants to make it an "Elite Twelve"? What is Lyra's first mission?

All these questions and more when the second arc "Double Weddings" finally begins...

Lyra the Leech belongs to DeviantArt user KivaHoloTitan

Double Weddings: Prologue

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Prologue: Double Proposal

The entire R.F.S. had gotten Sonic and Sally's cryptic message. Every single team that operated under the R.F.S. had heard the terrible news that had been discovered just a week ago. That wasn't a single member of the R.F.S. that hadn't been warned about the rise of S.T.I.N.G. since the message had been given out by Nicole.

Fifteen years had passed since the birth of Princess Zoe "Zoom" the Hedgehog and those fifteen years had been peaceful, as were the two years that had been lived and enjoyed since the fall of Enerjak back in 2143. Three long years of fighting the infamous Dr. Eggman and one year spent fighting The Dark Armada had been rewarded with over a decade of peace for Mobius. But sadly, the peace was not to last. A group of Eggman-worshipers known as S.T.I.N.G. had risen in Eggman's stead and had made its first sinister move. The group consisted of Scorn the Robian Scorpion, Fang the Rattlesnake, Swoop the Bald Eagle, Razoul the Lion and Breakdown the Barracuda and they all believed Eggman's motives to be the thing that Mobius needed and didn't see why Sonic and friends rebelled against him back then. They even saw Sonic and friends as the REAL dictators and wanted Sonic dead. They had come close, so very close, but Sonic had survived though not without losing Castle Acorn in a fire and having to rescue his kidnapped daughter, who had secretly been bugged with a tiny machine that would come into play later down the line. As of now, Sonic and his family were spending time in Soleanna to wind down from the current events. Of course, the R.F.S. had been informed of that too in case any of them wondered about the Royal Family.

Miles "Tails" Prower had been the first to hear about it and had even been there to wave goodbye as the Royal Family left to their home in

Soleanna. He was one of the few Royal Fighters who still lived in New Mobotropolis. His girlfriend Cosmo the Seedrian and Team Chaotix were among the ones still living in New Mobotropolis alongside Sonic and Sally too. The rest had moved out to live their own lives, including Tails's beloved sister Sora Prower. She had moved to live in a house in Chun-Nan with her boyfriend Ruben the Water Panther. The siblings remained in contact with each other and never missed a day to have a chat with each other. Of course, Sora and Ruben hadn't been thrilled to hear about how bad things had gone since S.T.I.N.G.'s first attack and the destruction of Castle Acorn. They had promised to keep a look out for anybody who might be a S.T.I.N.G. member and to make sure the sinister organization didn't get the drop on the R.F.S. again.

Tails had changed over the years gone by. At the age of 25, he was no longer the cute little boy genius he had once been. He was now an adult, no longer a fox cub, and it showed with his appearance. His shoulders and chest were much broader then before. Not quite muscular but clearly showing he was not a little boy anymore. His whiskers were longer and he had a "mullet" growing from the back of his head. He had a pair of hi-tech goggles perched above his eyes.

His attire had changed too, another sign of his growing up. He wore a black belt with a silver buckle around his waist and two metal bands around his upper arms. He also wore red and silver arm and leg gauntlets that contained a bunch of hidden gadgets that he himself had built. They were something he had made purely to test his capabilities as a tech-wiz and inventor. He never thought there'd be a day he'd actually need to use them in battle but given S.T.I.N.G.'s first move, he knew that he would get to see just how potent his new gadgets were.

Tails had not had an easy childhood. Ending up in the midst of a war between a mad scientist who wanted to conquer the world and a group of resistance fighters, one had to sacrifice childhood for the greater good. While he had been of great help against Dr. Eggman over the years and had a brotherly bond with Sonic the Hedgehog,

he had lost his parents and been a victim of bullying because of his trademark twin-tails. Over the months and years he had been on the R.F.S., he had seen things that no child his age should ever have seen from people being killed in front of his eyes to an apocalyptic alternate universe he had ended up on during the legendary multi-verse crisis in which he'd even seen his own counterpart die a rather grisly death. He had even been at the centre of a scheme that had been hi-jacked by Metal Sonic and saw the world remade in his image. He'd watched Cosmo die in that alternate reality and had to live with the fact he was the ONLY one who ever remembered that.

But by far the most traumatizing incident in his life had occurred during the Dark Armada War in 2143. He had been kidnapped and roboticized by Dr. Finitevus. Forced to serve him loyally as the cold-hearted and ruthless Mecha Tails, he had fought against his friends, helped Dr. Finitevus to create the Synthetic Chaos Formula that led to him becoming Enerjak and most sickeningly of all...an actual murder on his hands. Tails still cringed even to this day when he thought about the terrible time he'd gutted Mariah the Medicine Cat like a fish and put an end to her renowned career as a nurse who created miraculous cures for the world.

It had taken many years of spending time with his friends and even some sessions of therapy to help Tails get over this terrible ordeal. But it had worked. While he still thought back to that time on occasion, it never reduced him to a cowering, emotional wreck when it happened. That was the past, he didn't have to worry about Finitevus or Mecha Tails anymore. There were still times he visited Mariah's grave and paid his respects to her, feeling he owed her that much for killing her back then.

Right now, he was chatting to Sonic the Hedgehog on one of the computers in Royal HQ. Sonic himself was using Nicole's handheld form to establish visual contact while Tails was using a webcam to show himself to Sonic. The twin-tailed fox could clearly see that Sonic and Sally were in their Soleanna home, resting in the bedroom for the night. Zoe was there too.

"…so while Castle Acorn is definitely beyond salvaging at this point, I can definitely confirm that the debris has been cleared away safely Sonic." he reported, "We're still keeping the site fenced off though, best to keep the populace away from the charred remains of the castle."

Tails's voice had deepened with age too. While he still sounded youthful, he had lost the childlike charm his voice had once had.

"That's great buddy." Sonic responded, "Any news about S.T.I.N.G.?"

"Not a thing." Tails said grimly, "We've had a whole week of nothing. I haven't lowered security or anything though. I'm not losing my guard just because those creeps aren't doing anything."

"That's a great idea." Sally said approvingly, "We've made that mistake many times before, letting our guard down and giving our enemies the chance to get the drop on us. We won't let it happen this time."

"You and me both Sally." Tails nodded, "Eggman's bad enough but Eggman cultists are even worse! But enough about me, what about you guys?" he asked curiously.

"Things have been very peaceful here too." Sonic replied, "Soleanna's been very quiet, not so much as a breath about S.T.I.N.G. around here. The Duke and Duchess have been very hospitable and welcoming and the princess has been making friends with Zoe."

"Elise is a great friend!" Zoe cut in, "She's been teaching me some of her judo skills so I can be a better fighter. I can't wait to kick S.T.I.N.G.'s asses next time we see them!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I look forward to it too Zoe." Tails chuckled. He admired Zoe's enthusiasm and attitude for it reminded him fondly of his relationship with Sonic. He had admired those traits about his best friend growing up.

"We all look forward to it." Sonic added, "Me especially! It feels like Scorn and his cronies are undermining our hard work ya know?"

"Too right there." the twin-tailed gadgeteer sighed, "We didn't spend three years fighting Eggman and one year fighting Finitevus just to be back at square one. That's the sad truth about life. There's always going to be evil as well as good in the world."

"Yeah. But we've proven Finitevus wrong in our cause being "forlorn"!" the king added excitedly, "We had over 17 years of peace and I spent fifteen of them raising Zoe. That's definitely something!"

Tails smiled, nodding in agreement. Any amount of peace, whether it be one year or two years or even a million years was to be considered an achievement of some kind and he definitely still felt proud that he had helped to bring seventeen years of peace to Mobius. Zoe then came closer to the camera. She looked like she had something on her mind.

"Say Uncle Tails, forgive me for asking but…how's things with you and Cosmo?" the princess suddenly asked.

The gadget master paused for a moment, surprised at the question. He supposed he should've expected a question about he and his girlfriend's relationship. Childhood sweethearts since the day they'd met, Tails and Cosmo had grown ever closer as time went by. So close that…

"Funny you should ask Zoe." Tails said, rubbing the back of his head, "I was actually planning something big between us. You see, we've had a dark shadow fall over us earlier this week. So…to give us something pleasant to think about and to shine some light on Mobius again…I was considering proposing to her."

The Acorn Family all let out a chorus of surprised gasps. But their surprise quickly turned into delight as they took this in. If they hadn't been convinced that Tails was all grown up then they were certainly convinced now. The fox just smiled bashfully in return.

"Ohmigosh, that's awesome!" Zoe squealed, "You're going to ask Cosmo to marry you!"

"I'm surprised it took this long honestly." Sonic snickered, "You've been making goo-goo eyes at each other since, how old, eight? And NOW is the time you're gonna propose to her?"

"Well sorry I'm not as fast as you are Sonic." Tails retorted, smiling at the cheeky remark.

"Nevertheless, we're very happy to hear that you're going to do such a thing Tails." Sally said sweetly, "A wedding between you two would be just the thing to take people's minds off of the horrors that have recently occurred."

"I just hope Cosmo will say yes…" Tails murmured nervously, "I know we love each other but…you know, does she love me enough to want to be my wife? I mean she is a Seedrian and not a Mobian so she might be weirded out by the thought of marrying me."

"Nonsense! She'll be thrilled to be your wife!" Sonic insisted, "Doesn't matter that she's not Mobian. If a hedgehog can marry a chipmunk then a fox can marry an alien plant. Nothing wrong with that." he added, winking.

The fox smiled thoughtfully. He supposed his best friend had a point. Why would Cosmo find the idea of marrying him weird?

"Be sure to tell us what Aunt Cosmo says when you ask her!" Zoe piped eagerly.

"Will do kiddo." Tails promised, "I'm gonna go ask her right now. See ya around guys and stay safe."

"You too buddy. Good luck." Sonic said with a wave.

"Bye Uncle Tails!" Zoe replied, waving with him.

"See you later dear." Sally added.

The conversation was now over. Tails switched off the webcam, leaving the Acorn family to have some peace for the night. Now was the perfect time to pop the question, the biggest question he was likely every going to ask. He could feel his heart kicking his ribcage furiously as if it was a prisoner trying to break out. Would Cosmo say yes? He hoped she would. Tails wanted to spend the rest of his life with his beautiful girlfriend and maybe start a family of his own. That gave him something to consider. What would fox/Seedrian babies turn out like? He half-smiled at the thought as he got up out of his seat and left the lab.

Stored in his tails was a box containing the engagement ring that Tails had bought himself for the inevitable proposal. He took the box out and opened it up, revealing a gold flower-shaped ring with a beautiful sapphire jewel in the centre. He had chosen it specifically because it fit his girlfriend's plant-like appearance. Breathing in slowly to ease his nerves, Tails exited Royal HQ and headed off for home. He still lived in the house that he chosen to live in himself when New Mobotropolis had opened. He could easily have chosen a bigger place to live in, especially now he had the money for it. But to him, this small little house was home and had been for many years. He was attached to it and was all too happy that he'd be proposing to Cosmo in it.

Tails entered his house and called out merrily for her. He assumed she was still here but always liked to make double sure anyway.

"Hey Cosmo, are you home?"

"I'm right upstairs dear." a feminine voice replied back.

Pleased to hear she was home, Tails climbed up the stairs and walked over to Cosmo's bedroom door. He assumed by "I'm right upstairs dear" that this was the room she was in. He rapped on it.

"Come in sweetie." Cosmo replied.

He had guessed correctly. Breathing in and out slowly, Tails let himself in. This was it, the big moment he'd been waiting for. He was going to propose to his beloved and be prepared for the answer. His nerves tingled but he fought to keep himself under control. What kind of husband-to-be shivers like a nervous wreck in front of his girlfriend? He would never live with the embarrassment.

As he walked into the room, he noticed that Cosmo was lying on her bed and reading through a book on Mobian Botany. Being as how the planet was her home now, she had dedicated herself to learning everything about plant-life on Mobius.

Like Tails, Cosmo had grown up over the years. She was no longer the sweet little plant girl she once was, she was now a strikingly beautiful woman, aged 25 like Tails, with very long leafy hair and the rosebuds now blossoming into wonderfully scented flowers on each side of her head. She had grown taller and had a slender figure that had formed with her age. She still had the gem on her chest and it seemed to glow whenever Cosmo was happy or excited. Despite looking older, her attire was no different. She still wore the same flowery skirt, white leggings and green slippers she wore in her youth. They had just been accommodated to fit her new height.

Cosmo, like Tails, had pretty much grown up with no real childhood. Evacuated from her home planet Greengate as a child, she had crash landed on Mobius after being pursued by a maniacal creature named Marik the Martian. The Seedrians had been at war with the Martians and the war had ended with Greengate being destroyed. Cosmo was now the last surviving Seedrian in the universe, a terrible tragedy to befall such a young child. But thanks to her friends on Mobius, she had grown to embrace her life on Mobius and was grateful to have the wonderful friends she now had. Finitevus had caused more traumas for her by forcing her to be a spy for the Dark Armada, making her betray her friends for her boyfriend's sake. And when her usefulness had come to an end, Finitevus merely locked her in a cell and left her to be used for stress relief. Mecha Tails had even been the one doing the beating some of the time. It had taken

Cosmo a long time to get over what had happened in the Dark Armada war and although the events still haunted her, she never let it get in the way of her current life.

Tails had been the kindest to her of all the Mobians she had met, the fox making her feel very welcome and at home when she'd crash-landed on Mobius all those years ago. He'd always been there to lift her up when she was down, listen to her when she needed to talk to somebody and even provided her with a shoulder to cry on when she was down. Tails's kindness had won Cosmo over and she couldn't see herself with anybody else.

Cosmo looked up from her book and smiled at the sight of her boyfriend. She could be in the most morbid situation one could think of and just seeing Tails would be enough to brighten her day. She sat up as Tails approached her.

"Why hello Tails." she said politely.

"Hi Cosmo." the twin-tailed fox waved back, "You reading something interesting?"

"Oh yes. I've been studying Mobian Botany for a while and this book is very informative." the Seedrian said enthusiastically, "I'm learning so much about plant-life on Mobius!"

"Yeah, our world is full of interesting plant-life." Tails nodded, "Though not as interesting as Mobian life right?" he added, grinning impishly.

"Oh you, you know that you're the most interesting thing in my life handsome." Cosmo purred humourously.

The two laughed for a moment as Tails sat down on the bed with Cosmo and pulled her closer to him. He could smell the wonderful aroma emitting from the roses on her head and the scent made him want to just lie down and relax beside her. If there was one thing that could make his day, it was the smell of Cosmo's roses.

"Gosh you smell lovely..." he said out loud, though he hadn't meant to.

"Aww, thank you." Cosmo giggled, flattered by her boyfriend's words.

Tails flinched upon realizing that he had just said those words out loud and blushed scarlet. God, he was 25 years old now and still blushing in the presence of his lover! He must look like an idiot at this point! But Cosmo didn't seem to mind. Then again, Cosmo had always found Tails's shyness rather cute.

"Heh, was that out loud...?" he stammered, rubbing the back of his head nervously, "Ahem...sorry eh...say Cosmo, I was just chatting to the Acorn Family a moment ago." he quickly said, changing the subject.

"What about dear?" the Seedrian asked curiously.

"Mostly how they're getting on and how we're keeping an eye out for S.T.I.N.G. agents." the fox replied, "It's kinda scary ya know how Sonic told us that Scorn told him that S.T.I.N.G. has eyes and ears everywhere...I like to think that Scorn told him that just to spread paranoia through us but given what happened a week ago, I doubt he was bluffing."

"And that's the scary part...anybody we know could be working for S.T.I.N.G." Cosmo nodded, a twinge of worry in her voice, "I hope nobody accuses me of working for them given...my part in the Dark Armada's attempts to destroy the world 17 years ago." her face fell upon saying those words. It was very likely that people would get that idea about her given what she did for the Dark Armada all those years years may have passed, but that didn't mean the memories of that time were gone.

"If anybody even THINKS about accusing you Cosmo, they're gonna regret it!" Tails declared, putting an arm around her, "I know for a fact that you're not working for those guys. Given the trauma you've been

put through at the Dark Armada's hands, why would you EVER want to work for another group of villains again?"

"That is precisely what I think." Cosmo agreed, placing a hand on the fox's well-toned chest and fingering at the fur, "All working for the Dark Armada did was make things worse for myself and everybody else. The same thing would happen if I was working for S.T.I.N.G. too..."

"Ditto." Tails murmured, "Still, given there's a creep named Ramirez who can disguise himself with a holographic disguise emitter, we can't be too careful on who we trust or talk to. In fact, Sonic's told us all to check anybody who's wearing a watch to make sure that it is actually a watch and not a disguise emitter. Of course, me and you are above suspicion since we never wear watches."

"So in that sense, if you see me and I'm wearing a watch, even though I never wear one, chances are it's not me." Cosmo said, smiling briefly.

"And we'll have caught ourselves a S.T.I.N.G. agent." Tails said, smirking.

He could already imagine how mad S.T.I.N.G. would be when they found out that they'd captured their chameleon man, who was quite literally a chameleon man. What a blow to their operations Ramirez's capture would be if he was caught! But Tails decided not to press on about S.T.I.N.G. anymore. This wasn't what he was here for! Shaking his head, he allowed his hand to slip between his tails again. Now was the time, don't waste it! Propose to her and do it now! Cosmo noticed this with an inquisitive look on her face.

"Do excuse me Tails but what are you doing?" she asked, "Is there something you're hiding in your tails?"

"Yeah, sorta." Tails said sheepishly, taking his hand away. Cosmo was quick to notice that his hand was closed in a fist, meaning he had something in it now. What could it be?

"Cosmo, I didn't come here just to talk about S.T.I.N.G. and ask about how you're doing." the twin-tailed fox admitted, "I came here for something else entirely. I just allowed myself to be distracted for some reason..."

"Oh. Then what is it you're here for?" the alien plant girl questioned.

Looking down at his closed fist, Tails swallowed a lump in his throat. There was no going back now. Smiling queasily, he held up his hands and showed Cosmo what he had. It was a small box, presumably one that held a ring of some kind. Cosmo's eyes widened in excitement. Was this what she thought it was? She stared intently at the box as Tails opened it up.

"To ask for your hand in marriage my love." Tails answered, showing the engagement ring to her, "I just thought that now would be the perfect time given we've had a bad time lately. We could do with something pleasant to take our minds off of S.T.I.N.G. for a while. Cosmo, will you marry me?" he asked, his heart pounding so fast he no longer registered the individual beats.

The Seedrian could only stare as if hypnotized by the glorious ring in the box. Shaped like a flower and with a sapphire jewel in the centre, it was the perfect ring for her! She took the box from Tails, still staring at the ring and turning the question over and over in her head. Tails had finally done it, he'd asked her to marry him! She'd been waiting for years to hear Tails ask those five words to her and now the question had finally been asked. With tears in her eyes, Cosmo threw her arms around the fox's shoulders and pulled him into a deep, passionate kiss that seemed to answer his question for her. Tails embraced her back, knowing that the answer was yes without needing to hear the word himself.

"Tails, I thought you'd never ask!" Cosmo cried gleefully, "Yes, I will marry you! I couldn't think of anybody in the world I'd rather be married to!"

"Heh, thank you sweetie..." Tails replied bashfully, running a hand through his soon-to-be-wife's leafy hair, "I was hoping you'd say yes. I love you so much that it was just meant to be really, that I was eventually going to propose to you."

"We should tell our friends about the happy news!" Cosmo piped eagerly, "Your sister in particular will go crazy with joy when she hears we're getting married!"

"So will Ruben." Tails agreed, "Speaking of him and Sora, I wouldn't be too surprised if those two are gonna get hitched at some point!"

That set himself and Cosmo off. They both feel down onto the bed laughing like little children over the little joke. The funny thing was...

...rather coincidentally, Ruben the Water Panther was planning on proposing to Sora Prower at this very moment!

While it was night over in New Mobotropolis, it was dawning over in Chun-Nan. There was a big time difference between the two zones. It was often said that you could be sleeping in New Mobotropolis while Chun-Nan remained awake and vice versa.

Being born in Chun-Nan, Ruben had no trouble getting used to being back in his home country. He had moved back into the place when he had turned 16 and was now living in his very own pagoda which contained all the luxuries one could possibly want or need in such a country. Even to this day, Ruben still couldn't quite believe he was actually living in his own home. He was 27 years old now and he had changed quite considerably over the years that had passed by.

Ruben was taller and broader than he once was. Like Tails, he wasn't quite muscular but he clearly looked like he had grown much from the 17 years that had passed since the fall of Enerjak. Ruben had a new hairstyle, which looked more ruffled then before and he wore a green and red robe that signified his status as a Chun-Nan resident. He no longer wore gloves. He wasn't sure why he had

made that choice to no longer wear them, he just decided not to now. Aside from that, he still looked very much like the boy he had once been with his kind and honourable personality, his blur fur and purple markings and his trademark aqua-collar that he still wore around his neck.

Ruben had grown up loved and neutered by a clan known as the Hǎilàng clan. The name meant "Ocean Wave" in Chun-Nan's native language. His mother had been the leader of the clan, known as the Bride of the Gentle Waves. To Ruben, she had only been known as "mother". The Hǎilàng clan had been heartlessly and ruthlessly slaughtered by a power-hungry kung-fu mistress known as Zira the Ruthless. Ruben was the only survivor of the clan and had run away from Chun-Nan to escape the terror and despair he had been left with. All that had resulted in was him being captured by a pair of slave drivers known as Marcus and Celia Punch. He had been tortured, whipped and humiliated by them but he had escaped. This had then led to him meeting Tails and Cosmo, two people he would later know as his friends among the rest of the New Mobotropolis Royal Fighters. He had enjoyed his life with the team, feeling very welcome among them and like they were a new clan to him. He had loved all the friends he made during his time as a Royal Fighter. But there was one whom he loved as more than just a friend. And that person was Sora Prower.

Ruben was right now visiting one of his closest friends. Said friend was the former Princess of Chun-Nan. She had recently took up the mantle of Empress with her husband Bladefeather the Falcon ruling alongside her as Emperor. The previous Emperor, Dalon Tai, had recently died of natural causes with his daughter and her husband as the only heirs to the throne. His daughter was named Dalon Matilda.

Trained to be a kung-fu mistress since she was a child, Matilda had not had an easy life. Witnessing the death of her mother at a very young age, she had lost all innocence that terrible day and the worse thing was that her mother's death was pretty much her own fault. She had provoked the moles and they had acted, although she

hadn't meant to make them mad. After her mother's death, she had been assigned to private martial arts lessons with a very wise and powerful badger named Kai Zen. At first, Matilda had openly refused to undergo the training for she hated violence. But in the end, she knew that in order to protect Chun-Nan, she needed to be able to fight. Plus her mother had wanted this from her so how could she dishonour her memory by refusing to respect her wishes?

Matilda looked older than before but still maintained her natural beauty and grace with her slender figure and raven black hair that was now styled in a long ponytail with two long strands over each side of her head. She wore an elegant purple robe that befitted her new status as Empress of Chun-Nan. The robe had gold trimmings and a green dragon stitched into the fabric. Matilda wore a red sash around her waist and more often then before, carried a red fan with her. She was holding it now as she and Ruben were chatting.

They were sitting in the living room of Matilda's royal home, the Pagoda of Prosperity. For many years it had been home to any emperor and empress that ruled the land. It had once been destroyed by the Region of Rebellious Reptiles but had since been rebuilt and stood as proud as ever. Matilda was alone with Ruben in the living room. Bladefeather was still sleeping, as were her two children. She and Ruben talked in low voices so as not to disturb them.

"...and I must say I'm quite proud of how well my School for Gifted Martial Artists is coming along." Matilda said, "I opened the place up only 15 years ago, a year after Jaycee was born and the same week that Miko was born and I'm just over the moon by how many students have been signing up for a chance to learn kung-fu there."

"I'm very happy to hear that honoured empress." Ruben said graciously, "I still remember standing there watching with Sora beside me when you declared the school open."

Like Tails, Ruben's voice had deepened with age. He sounded more like an adult then Tails did despite there being only two years

between them.

"I know, I invited you to come along." Matilda beamed, "Anyway, I've been honoured to be tutoring so many young people who are willing to learn the art of kung-fu just to protect their country from anybody who wishes to do harm. Some students have been rather...troubling I'm afraid though." she sighed, "Some aren't interested in the more important details and just want to learn how to...ahem, "kick butt" as they put it."

It was clear Matilda wasn't fond of using juvenile terms such as that, nor was she keen on the idea that people just wanted to learn kung-fu so they could hurt people.

"That's disgraceful behaviour..." Ruben agreed, "Kung-fu isn't just about being able to kick people's backsides in. It's about protecting your friends, family and the country you love. It's also disciplinary and a great method of exercise. Why can't everybody see that?"

"I wish I knew..." the empress sighed, "Though it's not all bad. I have more good students then bad. Jaycee and Miko are among the good students and they're progressing beautifully. I couldn't be prouder of my little angels right now..." she sighed happily.

The water panther beamed with delight. He had met Matilda's children and had known for a fact they would bring great honour to their country. It appeared he was right.

"But you don't have to keep the pretence up Ruben. I know for a fact you're not here just to see how I am." Matilda said, a kind smile spreading across her face, "I have a feeling there's something else on your mind."

Ruben just smirked.

"You don't miss a trick do ya?" he sneered teasingly.

"Nope. Never. You can't get anything past me these days." Matilda snickered.

The two Mobians laughed before Ruben decided to reveal what his visit was really about.

"Well...I did come here to see about you but yes, it is about something else." he admitted, "You see, I'm sure you heard about this new enemy that's threatening our peace right?"

"Word travels fast around Chun-Nan..." Matilda murmured, "That and the communications towers that daddy allowed Sally to install allowed us to hear King Sonic's cryptic message. It's scandalous to think that there are seriously people who paint Eggman as a hero..." she screwed her face up in disgust.

"Well given how hard Sonic and his family were hit by their first move, I thought about something I could do to...you know, lighten the mood?" the water panther explained.

"That sounds lovely dear. What is it?" Matilda asked.

"Well...I was thinking about proposing to my girl, Sora." Ruben replied, blushing upon admitting this.

Upon hearing the water-powered Mobian's intentions, Matilda's face lit up with so much delight that if it was possible to glow just by smiling, she'd be brighter then the sun itself.

"Oh Ruben, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed, "How lovely! You're going to propose to that wonderful Sora woman you've been living with since you moved back here! I couldn't honestly think of anybody more honourable that you could marry."

"Aww...thanks your majesty." Ruben said bashfully, "I've loved Sora for years and I think now is the time to finally tie the knot. But will she accept it?" he suddenly asked, feeling nervous, "It's true we've been together since I moved into my own pagoda but what if she doesn't

wanna marry me? What if I dishonour myself and her just by asking?!" he sighed for a moment and looked down at the floor, "It's why I came empress. I'm real nervous right now and I just wondered what you had to say about this."

The empress nodded, understandingly completely why Ruben was feeling this way. She had been told by Bladefeather that he'd been equally as nervous when proposing to her long ago. She pondered for a moment, thinking of the right words to say. Romance was a complex subject and required a lot of careful thought before giving advice on it. She then came up with her answer.

"Well Ruben, getting engaged is a very big change for the two people involved." Matilda said, "And you need to remember that the worse thing that can happen is your love says no. There's no shame really in your proposal being refused so don't feel too bad if Sora says no. I'm sure she still loves you very much no matter what she says. If she doesn't want to marry you, you can still have a happy life together as a couple. Some couples stay together and never get married and I should know. I've met some of them. So my advice is to pop the question and just be happy no matter what Sora's answer is."

Ruben listened to every word Matilda said intently and thought to himself about the answer. She had good points and he believed what she said. Sora did love him and proposing marriage wouldn't change that. So why worry? He would feel a little down if Sora didn't accept but it didn't mean she was going to stop loving him. Smiling, he got up from his cushion and hugged Matilda graciously.

"Thank you your grace. That was very helpful." he said.

"Anytime Ruben. Do tell how the proposal went will you?" Matilda asked.

"You'll be one of the first to hear about it." Ruben promised, "I'll see you later."

"Goodbye dear." Matilda waved.

Ruben waved back as he turned and left the room. As he exited the Pagoda of Prosperity, he began to think about how he was going to approach Sora and drop the question. Should he jump straight into it or try and naturally let it happen? Whatever happened, he knew he couldn't mess up. He did not want to look like an idiot in front of his girlfriend. Forcing himself to relax, Ruben returned home, which wasn't very far away from the Pagoda of Prosperity, and he let himself in.

There, sitting at a table and surrounded by tools and bits of machinery was Sora Prower herself. The vixen had grown up just as much as her brother had. Now at the age of 28, Sora had a slender figure and a more mature appearance. She also wore more than just her utility belt this time, wearing a black tank top and shorts with knee high boots instead that greatly resembled the shoes she once wore. She still wore her old gloves and had her hair styled differently with two strands draping over the front of her shoulders. She even had green eye shadow on her eyelids. She still wore her trademark utility belt and it had more gadgets than ever.

Sora was Tails's sister, though she'd barely even been in his life due to circumstances beyond her control. Her parents were so financially unstable that they couldn't afford to look after two children. Sora had willingly given herself up since she felt Trails needed a mother's care more than she did. So at the age of 4, with Tails much too young to remember her at the time, she'd been given to an orphanage to which she'd ended up being adopted by a man named Martin Sumdac. He was a spy working for the M.S.I.U. and had spent the many years she'd been living with him training her up to be a spy. Sora had become one of the most efficient agents in the history of the organization at only twelve years old and had proven herself capable in a mission. Martin had tragically been killed by Fang the Sniper though Sora had lived on in his footsteps. Her first mission had been at age eleven and it took her another year before she would ever be reunited with Tails. Upon reuniting, the two siblings

had vowed never to lose each other again. And they had kept that vow throughout the whole period of peace the world had been blessed with before S.T.I.N.G.'s first move.

Sora and Ruben had begun their relationship when Sora had joined the R.F.S. At first, she'd given him rather complimentary remarks and had taught him how to climb. In return, Ruben had been kind and supportive to her, especially during that terrible day she was dying from a spell accidentally inflicted on her by Blizzard the Ice Witch. Ruben had even saved her life when Scourge and Fiona had been ordered to kill her by Finitevus. He along with Tails had been the only ones to hear her story about how she became a spy and the water panther and vixen had been very close since.

Upon moving in with Ruben when he'd bought the pagoda they now occupied, Sora had grown to love Chun-Nan's culture and pretty much considered it a second home. Of course, many memories had come back to her, namely the time she'd helped Matilda save the Five Festivals from being ruined by a jealous former emperor, and because of that, she'd been made very welcome in the country. As of now, she was putting the finishing touches on a new orb she was making. She didn't appear to have heard Ruben come in.

"OK, just arrange the circuitry as so and the power input should flow perfectly..." the spy murmured.

"Good morning Sora." Ruben said politely.

Sora looked up and turned around, looking almost surprised to see her boyfriend again. Her face lit up with a smile that really added to her attractive appearance.

"Good morning Ruben." she replied, "Back from Matilda already?"

"Oh yes, I hadn't planned for a long stay anyway." the water panther replied, "Things are going well it seems, especially with Matilda's school."

"I'm glad to hear." said Sora, "I'm impressed she can run a school for martial artists and run a country at the same time. I doubt I could handle all that responsibility." she added, half-laughing.

"She's lucky to have a devoted husband to act in her absence." Ruben reminded, "Bladefeather is equally in charge as Matilda is ya know."

"Of course." Sora nodded, "Say, I've been working on a new gadget." she added, showing Ruben what she was up to, "It's something that could potentially help us weed out any potential S.T.I.N.G. agents. When it's complete, this orb will scan anybody with an invisible beam and let me know if they're equipped with a holographic disguise emitter or any concealed weapons."

Ruben looked closer at the steel orb, which was half finished with exposed circuitry on the other half. How did the vixen make these things? It was incredible at the sheer potency that these tiny orbs operated on!

"That's impressive!" Ruben gasped.

"I know. Nobody will get the drop on us with this thing." Sora declared, "Anybody working for S.T.I.N.G. can say goodbye to any attempts at fooling us, we're gonna proper flush them out!"

"I bet Tails would be impressed."

"He already invented a gadget of his own that does this stuff."

"Heh, of course he has. What hasn't he invented?"

"Want me to make a list?"

Ruben and Sora both laughed at the joke. As soon as they stopped laughing, Ruben put an arm around Sora, making the vixen feel puzzled.

"Um...why are you doing that?" she asked.

"I'm uh...just happy to be with you right now." the water panther said nervously.

"You're hiding something aren't you?" Sora asked suspiciously, "You seem a little nervous. Is there something wrong?"

Ruben wasn't at all surprised that Sora had worked him out. She IS a spy after all, she was trained to pick up on these things. It was near impossible to hide anything from Sora. Smiling bashfully, Ruben decided it was time to propose. It was the right time for it. Clearing his throat, he began.

"No my love. Far from it." Ruben said, trying not to look nervous, "There's something right actually. You know how we've been together for years and how our relationship has grown..."

"Yes?" Sora asked, curious to see where this was going.

"Well...I...I...uh...I wanna take our relationship to the next step." Ruben stammered.

He reached into his robe pocket and took out something. He presented it to Sora. The vixen gasped, putting her hands to her mouth in surprise. It was a marriage bracelet, a traditional proposal item in Chun-Nan. The bracelet was made of silver and contained two halves that formed together to make a couple kissing each other when it was clipped together and worn. Ruben rolled one of his sleeves up to reveal that he had one himself. The tradition goes that a proposer wears the first bracelet and the second should be given to the woman. Sora had learnt about the bracelet and what it meant and knew what was coming.

"Oh my gosh...Ruben...are...are you...?" she whispered.

"Yes I am." Ruben said, "Sora, will you give me the great honour of becoming my wife?" he asked, pleading that she'd accept.

The stunned vixen stared at the bracelet, unable to speak for a moment. Tears of joy began brimming around the edges of her eyes. Then slowly, he lowered her hands, placed them in Ruben's and took the bracelet from them. Then she clipped it around her own wrist and threw her arms around the aqueous Mobian's shoulders.

"Ruben...this is quite possibly the happiest day of my life next to being reunited with Tails." she whispered, "Yes, yes I will marry you!"

Delighted, Ruben picked her up and twirled her around with delight, earning a giggle of pleasure from his fiancée. He then put her down and the two kissed, happy to be betrothed at last. They didn't let go of each other for a very long time as if worried they would ruin the mood if they broke up.

"I'm so glad you said yes Sora." Ruben said, stroking her hair.

"What reason do I need NOT to say yes?" Sora retorted, running her hands through is hair, "You're loving, honourable, devoted and you saved my life many years back. I'd have to be a complete bitch to turn down a proposal from you!"

"I wouldn't have used language like that but OK." Ruben said uneasily, "Anyway, we've just got to tell Tails and Cosmo about this! They'll be thrilled!"

"I'll say! My brother's often asked if we'll ever get engaged." Sora said excitedly, "He'll be SOOOO happy!"

Unable to contain their excitement, the two rushed out of the pagoda to tell the fox and Seedrian the good news...

Awwwww, how suh-weet! ^^ Tails and Ruben have proposed to their girlfriends and both say yes! Looks like there's going to be a double wedding coming our way. What a way to brighten the mood for Mobius after S.T.I.N.G.'s first attack! :D

Tune in next time as our grooms and brides to be go through their "Wedding Preparations"...

Double Weddings: Chapter 1

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 1: Wedding Arrangements

Of course, Tails and Ruben hadn't waited long to tell each other the great news. Such a life-changing thing would've been impossible to keep secret from one another, especially since they were close friends and never wasted a moment to tell each other about anything important happening.

Tails and Cosmo had run quickly into Tails's room so that they could contact the water panther and vixen. Every step they took was full of excitement and glee as they entered the room. The fox's bedroom was full of hi-tech gear, gadgets and tools and of course, contained a wide-screened desktop computer that Tails was seldom seen away from. Tails sat down at the computer, switched it on and instantly set up communications with Ruben and Sora. The super spy had installed communications equipment in the pagoda that Ruben had bought for the two to live in such as computers and webcams so that should they ever feel like talking to one another, they could do just that. They were miles apart and in different countries but thanks to the technology the Prower siblings had at their disposal, they could see and talk to one another without needing to leave their country.

Tails waited patiently for Ruben and Sora to log on as he switched on the webcam. He knew full well that it was morning in Chun-Nan so he wondered if Ruben and Sora were awake yet. Cosmo sat beside Tails, watching the screen intently, silently willing for it to hurry up and connect. She could feel the butterflies in her stomach as she itched to give out the good news.

After a few seconds passed, the screen changed and Tails and Cosmo were rewarded with the sight of their good friend and sister. Sora's hand filled up the screen as she adjusted her own webcam.

The image was so clear that it didn't look like they were chatting with merely a camera as their window to their homes. It actually looked like they were looking through some magical window that showed them what they wanted to see. Mobian technology had grown much more potent in the seventeen years that had passed since the fall of Enerjak. Sora sat down beside Ruben, the two grinning as they saw Tails and Cosmo's faces smiling back at them on their own computer screen.

"Good morning from Chun-Nan my friends!" Ruben cried excitedly.

"In our case it's Good evening." Tails laughed, "It's actually night right now!"

"I know, time differences and that." Sora chuckled, "It's good to see you my little brother." she added gleefully.

"Sora, I'm not little anymore." Tails retorted humorously.

"Big or small, you're still my little brother to me." Sora replied.

"How are you two?" Cosmo asked sweetly, "You seem quite happy. Is something good happening?"

Ruben and Sora both winked at each other, knowing full well that Cosmo had given the understatement of the century. They both giggled excitedly as they looked back at the Seedrian.

"You have no idea just how right you are Cosmo!" the water panther exclaimed.

"We've got something wonderful to show you two." the vixen added.

The two showed the fox and Seedrian their wrists, showing off their marriage bracelets. Tails and Cosmo had been well-educated on Chun-Nan culture over the many years they'd spent with Ruben or visiting the country so they knew instantly what the bracelets meant. Tails was so surprised he almost leapt out of his chair in amazement.

Cosmo however looked as if she was about to cry with joy, clasping her hands together.

"Oh my gosh..." she whispered.

"Holy galoshes guys, you got engaged?!" Tails cried, "That's so awesome and wonderful! And also funny too cause me and Cosmo just got engaged as well!"

He and Cosmo then showed the two their engagement rings, earning a gasp of surprise and pleasure from the two Mobians on their screen. Ruben and Sora looked ecstatically happy to see this and both could barely contain their excitement for a moment.

"Oh. My. God! My little brother's all grown up and getting married!" Sora squealed. She no longer sounded like the superspy she was, but like an excited schoolgirl gushing over a boy in the playground that she fancied, "I can't tell you how thrilled I am Tails! You and Cosmo are going to be a couple!"

"I can't tell you how honoured I am to see you two like this." Ruben said, wiping a tear from his eye, "You two deserve each other and I can't imagine you two getting married to anybody else."

Tails smiled with pleasure, putting an arm around his fiancée. Cosmo returned the gesture, slipping her arm around her fiancé.

"Thanks guys, that means so much to me." he replied, "And it warms my heart in return to see you two engaged too. I've longed to see my big sister getting hitched with a nice man and I'm glad that nice man is you Ruben." he said, meaning every word he said.

"You two deserve each other as well." Cosmo said sweetly, "I'm so glad you're both getting married."

Ruben and Sora both smiled with awe and held each other's hands. They agreed completely with what the Seedrian and fox had said.

"That was so sweet and kind of you to say." Sora said, her face full of delight.

"You honour us both with your kind words." Ruben replied, bowing his head as if in prayer.

"We're only saying what's true guys." Tails replied modestly, "I've gotta say though, it's a really big coincidence that we just happened to get engaged at the same time!"

The four soon-to-be-weds all burst out into fits of hysterical laughter, appreciating the funny side of the fact the two couples had both gotten engaged at the same time. It was indeed a very funny coincidence and one they'd never forget for the rest of their lives. Time was unpredictable and often acted in mysterious or humorous ways. This time had definitely been humorous. After laughing for a moment, Tails wiped his eyes and looked back over at the screen just as Ruben and Sora were beginning to calm down themselves.

"I gotta say, a double wedding is just the thing we need to give us all some joy and hope after S.T.I.N.G.'s first move last week." Tails said, "After a dark time like that, we're due for something pleasant for a change."

"Ditto." Ruben nodded, "We should tell the rest of the R.F.S. They'll be so happy to hear about this!" he added eagerly.

"I can already see Amy and Cream in particular going crazy over me." Cosmo snickered, grinning from ear to ear.

"I doubt they'll leave you alone until the big day arrives!" Sora giggled, "Say, that's something to consider, when should we have our weddings?" the vixen suddenly asked as if the thought just occurred to her.

"That's a good question sis." Tails said agreeably, "We don't wanna wait too long to have them. The sooner we can have them the better.

Maybe we could get married in a month or two. And we'll want both weddings on the same day too, that'll make it even more special."

"I think that could work dear." Cosmo said approvingly, "One wedding will bring joy back to the world, two weddings will bring even more joy to everyone."

"So we'll do that for sure." Ruben declared, "Our weddings will take place both on the same day. But where should we arrange for them to take place?" he murmured, glancing at Sora and back over to Tails and Cosmo.

"Oh my gosh, that's another thing to consider!" Sora cried, "Where to get married? It has to be something all four of us agree on of course. Last thing we want is to fight over destinations."

"How about the Great Forest?" Cosmo asked, "I'd love to have my wedding somewhere close to nature."

Three pairs of eyes glanced over at the Seedrian. They all understood completely why Cosmo would want to get married in a forest. The forest would be the perfect place for a Seedrian to get married in.

"That would be nice but I don't think a forest is the most practical place to host a wedding." Sora said, hoping not to offend Cosmo.

"I think we should get married right here in Chun-Nan." Ruben thought "I mean we all love the country don't we?"

"But then it might not feel as special to me and Cosmo." Tails noted, "It'd feel more like your wedding than a double wedding. We don't want it to feel like it's more for one couple than the other."

"My bro's right, we can't have a bias." Sora agreed, nodding her approval, "I was gonna suggest New Mobotropolis. We could just get married there as we're the New Mobotropolis Royal Fighters and our

marriages would pretty be a case of four Royal Fighters getting married."

"But it wouldn't be that special since me and Tails live here anyway." Cosmo noted, "I want somewhere more...exotic to make it more memorable and special. Aren't most the best weddings in the world ones that take place somewhere grand and beautiful?"

As Tails pondered on the matter, he listened to Cosmo's words and thought for a moment. Somewhere grand and beautiful. That would be the perfect place for a wedding and he knew plenty of places that fitted that category. And that was when he got a great idea. He knew the perfect destination for which to have their weddings.

"Aha! I know!" the gadgeteer exclaimed excitedly, "What about Soleanna?"

Everybody fell silent as they considered this thought. Yes...Soleanna was a nice place. It'd be a great city to have their weddings in! Soleanna, known also as "The City of Water" due to the fact that there were a lot of waterways around the town, was said to be one of the most beautiful and attractive establishments in all of Mobius. It was ruled by the Duke and Duchess of Soleanna and their daughter, Princess Elise. Popular with tourists and historians, Soleanna was one of Mobius's most well-known and beloved cities and was a popular holiday destination. Many people had weddings there too, which made the city all the more fitting a place for Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora to have their double weddings.

Ruben and Sora both nodded, coming to the same conclusion as they looked back over at Tails. Cosmo turned to face her fiance, a bright twinkle of delight in her eyes.

"Soleanna's a beautiful place." Cosmo said, "It'll be the perfect place for our weddings."

"I'll say." Ruben said brightly, "Tails, I think you just picked the perfect destination."

"Why did you pick Soleanna in particular?" Sora asked curiously.

Tails fell silent for a moment as he thought about the answer.

"Well...I just thought that since Sonic and his family are having a holiday there for the time being, it'd be nice for them if we hosted our weddings at Soleanna." he explained, "It'd be a nice way to give the Acorn family some joy since they were hit the hardest by S.T.I.N.G.'s first assault. That's honestly why I thought about Soleanna. We can make it as much for Sonic and his family as ourselves."

There was a long silence as Cosmo, Ruben and Sora took in everything Tails had said and thought about it. The fox just smiled sheepishly, hoping that his reason was good enough. Then the three Mobians looked back at him, all giving him a heartfelt smile that told him the good news. They thought it was a good reason.

"That was very, very thoughtful of you Tails." Cosmo said sweetly, "Your kindness and selflessness is why I fell for you all those years ago." she added, hugging Tails tightly.

"Aww, th-thanks my little rosebush." Tails replied, hugging her back, "I try to be as thoughtful and caring as I can be to my friends."

"And you sure succeeded in that regard." Sora said brightly, "I bet Sonic would appreciate the fact you want to have your wedding at the very place he's on holiday at now."

"It really is something he and his family need to wash away the stain that S.T.I.N.G. has left on their happiness." Ruben agreed, "You should tell Sonic about all of this buddy."

"I was intending to call Sonic next after I'd seen you guys." Tails replied, "And then I'll let Sonic and Sally have Nicole spread the message to all of our friends in the R.F.S. from all the world over. Every one of them's gonna want to see our double weddings!"

"You bet they do!" the super spy exclaimed excitedly, "Me and Ruben will tell Matilda and her family so you don't need to pass the message onto them brother. We'll be happy to do it for you."

"You two do just that. I'm gonna call Sonic and let him know as well." the twin-tailed genius said, "See you later Ruben, see you later Sora. I can't wait for our weddings!"

"Neither can I!" Ruben cried, "Farewell you two."

The water panther reached off-screen and Tails watched as he switched off the web-cam, transforming the screen back into total darkness. Tails and Cosmo looked at one another, still hugging each other as if unwilling to let go for a very long time. A warm feeling spread through both of them as they embraced.

"Oh what a great night this is already!" Tails cried, "We're engaged and Ruben and Sora are engaged too! I can't believe it!"

"I'm so over the moon right now!" Cosmo exclaimed, "Double weddings, and we're going to have them in Soleanna! Oh Tails...I can't think for a minute on how this could get any better."

"Neither can I my love." the fox replied, running his fingers through his fiancée's hair. How he loved feeling that smooth, leafy hair of hers.

"I can already see the wedding dress I'll be wearing now, and it's not even time yet!" the Seedrian giggled.

"Yeah. For me, I've gotta say it's been a while since I wore a suit." Tails added, smiling humorously, "It'll be nice to wear one again."

"I wonder what Ruben and Sora will look like when they get dressed for the wedding?" Cosmo mused, taking great delight in the thought that had come to her head.

"They'll look stunning, just like we will." Tails replied, turning back to the computer screen so he could give a call to the Acorn family, "Boy I can't wait to tell the others! They're gonna be so happy when we tell them what's happened!"

While the Royal Fighters had something to be happy about, it wasn't going to be happy for much longer. Completely unbeknownst to Tails, Ramirez the Chameleon had been eavesdropping on him and Cosmo as he'd been chatting to Ruben and Sora. He was still in disguise as the police officer iguana known as Nova and had been keeping an eye on things for S.T.I.N.G. so that they could remain a step ahead of the Royal Fighters. Although he'd returned to S.T.I.N.G.'s headquarters the day he'd destroyed Castle Acorn, he had been sent back to New Mobotropolis by Scorn himself so that nobody would get suspicious on why Nova was suddenly not there among the officers should there be a role call or a register taken of any policemen arriving for work. Ramirez had been there the entire week that had passed since Castle Acorn's destruction, feeding nuggets of information to Scorn and his team so they could plot their next move and bring down the R.F.S. once and for all. He was outside Tails's home under the pretence of guarding the place in case anybody suspicious dared to come near. Tails didn't know this of course but anybody who would think to ask would be told that was the case.

Ramirez had used a sophisticated piece of equipment invented by Swoop that allowed him to eavesdrop on any conversation taking place inside a building. It looked like a gun but the barrel was actually a dish, almost like what you'd find on a satellite, and if he pointed it in the right direction, he could pick up whatever was being said without having to be in the building. He wore headphones connected to the device so nobody else could hear what he was hearing. The voices were so clear that he almost felt like he was in the same room as Tails and Cosmo. The chameleon had listened to every word, though he could mostly hear Tails and Cosmo and hadn't been able to pick up much on what Ruben and Sora had said.

He smiled deviously as he took in what he was hearing. Boy would Scorn get a kick out of this! It was thanks to him that he knew Sonic was on holiday in Soleanna to recover from the terror S.T.I.N.G. had inflicted a week ago and now Scorn was about to hear something even more interesting.

Deciding not to stick around for too much longer in fear of making himself noticed, Ramirez switched off the device and slunk away from the house. As soon as he was away, he pulled out a communications device, a small object that looked like a phone but didn't have any numbers to dial since it was a one-way communication with S.T.I.N.G. and nobody else. He switched it on and put it to his ear.

"Hey Scorn." the spy sneered, "You're going to be so interested in what I've gotta tell ya now!"

"Do tell." came the voice of his leader on the other side of the communicator.

"I know you're not romantic or anything but this is something romance related that could play into our hands beautifully..."

"...whoa, you just got engaged with Cosmo and coincidentally, Ruben and Sora have gotten engaged too?!" Sonic exclaimed in surprise.

"Awww, how romantic!" Zoe squealed, her eyes all aglow, "Double weddings, what could be more romantic then that?!"

"I can't even begin to imagine what could dearest." Sally replied, stroking her daughter's hair softly, "Tails, Cosmo, you have my sincerest congrats for this wonderful development. You two will be a very happy couple I know and the fact Ruben and Sora are also getting married makes this even more wonderful."

Once the link had been established and the web-cams switched on, Tails and Cosmo found themselves face-to-face with the Acorn family on the screen before them. It was funny for Tails considering it hadn't been long since he'd been chatting to Sonic and now here he was, chatting to him again. He noticed that Zoe seemed to be in her pyjamas, meaning that she'd been getting ready for bed at this very moment. He hoped Sonic didn't mind too much that he was keeping his daughter awake for a bit longer. The king didn't seem bothered for he was just keen to know how the proposal had gone. He'd been thrilled to hear that Cosmo had accepted and that Tails wasn't the only one getting married. The fox smiled upon seeing his best friend's glee. He really deserved something so joyous to be happy about after what had happened.

"Thanks so much Queen Sally." Tails replied, "I can't tell you how happy I am that Cosmo accepted and we're gonna be a couple!"

"And I can't tell you how happy I am Tails finally proposed." Cosmo added, "I was beginning to wonder if he ever would."

"You and me both Cozzie." Sonic snickered teasingly.

Tails shook his head with a dry but humorous smirk on his face. 17 years since he'd saved the world from Enerjak and he was still the loveable jokester he was when he was a teen. He was glad Sonic hadn't lost his sense of humour.

"Anyway, I just thought I'd tell you what we've planned for our wedding." the fox said, "Me, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora all agree that we should get married soon and that it'd be best if we had a double wedding. Why not give Mobius double the joy of seeing four of its heroes getting married instead of two?"

"I think that's a great idea." Sally approved, "A double wedding it shall be then."

"Thank you." Cosmo said, "As for where we'll have it, Tails suggested Soleanna. He thought it'd be nice for you three if we had

it in the very place you're holidaying in. He wants to make it as much for you as ourselves."

"Yeah, pretty much." the fox replied modestly.

Sonic and Sally were stunned to hear this but nonetheless were very grateful for Tails's generosity and selfless thinking. That was why he was so beloved among the R.F.S., his friendliness made him the kind of person you wanted to be friends with. Smiling graciously, Sonic responded.

"Tails, you haven't lost one iota of your selflessness." he said, "That's pretty kind of you to want that for us."

"Thank you so much Tails." Sally added, "We'd be very happy for you and Ruben to have your weddings here in Soleanna. You've just turned our vacation into something even more with that idea."

"You're welcome, both of you." Tails said brightly, "I bet Princess Elise will be ecstatic to hear that her city's gonna be hosting a double wedding and it's for four of the New Mobotropolis Royal Fighters."

"Heh, the princess will be so happy that she'd be worshiped as a sun the next time they host their annual Festival of the Sun!" the king hedgehog laughed.

"Can I be your ring bearer Uncle Tails?" Zoe asked eagerly, "I'd love to be your ring bearer! Please can I be one?"

Tails could only chuckle at the princess's enthusiasm. That was something he'd always liked about Zoe when she was growing up.

"I think you'd be the perfect ring bearer for me and Cosmo Zoe." Tails replied, "Yes, you can be our ring bearer."

What happened next was something that left everybody unable to speak due to bursting out in fits of hysterical laughter. Zoe squealed like an excited little girl on Christmas Day, delighted that she was

being given the role she wanted in the wedding. For a moment, everybody laughed and found it hard to contain themselves as Zoe let out all the excitement she had in her. But then suddenly, Zoe's excitement was cut short as she then, for no apparent reason, keeled over in pain and clutched her stomach. That stopped the laughter and had everybody staring at her in concern. Tails had heard that Zoe had been getting stomach pains due to stress before they'd left to Soleanna but Zoe couldn't possibly still be stressed right now. It had to be something else.

"Zoe, what's wrong?" Sonic asked.

"Ungh...just another stomach pain daddy." Zoe muttered, "I'm getting really pissed off right now! Why do they keep happening?!"

"I really don't know dear..." Sally murmured, "You haven't been stressed since the day we arrived here so it can't be stress that's causing it..."

"Maybe you just got too excited kiddo." Sonic suggested, "If it keeps happening though, we'll need to give you an appointment with Sonar. I'm no doctor but even I know nobody has stomach pains like that for no real reason."

"Indeed so." Sally agreed.

"You're gonna be OK for the wedding won't you?" Cosmo asked, her face full of concern for the teen-hedgehog.

"I'll be fine Aunt Cosmo, don't sweat it!" Zoe insisted, "The pain's already going. That's another funny thing, it just seems to come and go. It never really lasts long."

"That is strange..." Tails murmured, "As Sonic says, if this keeps on going we'll definitely need to get you an appointment. I'd even be happy to give you a check over should you need one."

"Thanks Uncle Tails." the princess said gratefully, "So, what else have you planned about the double wedding?"

"Aside from the fact that we're gonna have it in Soleanna and we're gonna have it very soon, not much." Tails admitted, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, "We didn't even have a ring-bearer in mind until you asked Zoe. Though I know for a fact that I've got the perfect people in mind to be our best man and bridesmaid." he added, winking at the Acorn family.

Sonic and Sally caught on with what Tails was saying immediately and nodded. He was referring to them and they were flattered that they were the ones Tails wanted to be his and Cosmo's best man and bridesmaid.

"You want us for those jobs?" Sonic replied, "Tails, it'd be my utmost pleasure to be your best man. Course, I already AM your best man but you know what I mean." he added cheekily.

"Yeah Sonic, I get it." Tails retorted, grinning, "It's the least I could offer you and Sally Sonic. After all, I was your best man at your wedding so you can be one for mine."

Sonic nodded. Tails had indeed been his first and only choice for whom to have as his best man the day he and Sally had gotten married. Now he could return the favour by being best man for his best friend at his wedding.

"I'm glad you want me to fill that position Tails and I promise ya, I won't let ya down." Sonic swore.

"You never have and I doubt you ever will." the twin-tailed vulpine replied, smiling kindly at his best friend, "And Sally, you'll be a great bridesmaid for us."

"Thank you Tails." Sally replied, "It'd be my pleasure to be the bridesmaid for you and Cosmo."

"Glad to hear." Cosmo replied, "I wonder who Ruben and Sora will get as their best man and bridesmaid?"

"Knowing Ruben, I can totally see him picking Matilda for the latter part." Sonic said, "And Bladefeather might be their best man. Either way, I'm sure they'll be quick to inform us when they've made their plans."

"They will. They were very quick to let me and Cosmo know they'd gotten engaged." Tails chuckled, "Anyway, that's pretty much it for now buddy. Last thing I wanna say is can you have Nicole spread the word to all the other Royal Fighters? I want everybody on our team and all the other teams to hear about the double wedding. They're all invited!"

"We'll do just that Tails." Sally promised, "We'll see you later."

"Bye Uncle Tails, bye Aunt Cosmo!" Zoe piped, "Can't wait to be your ring-bearer!"

"See ya around Tails. Look forward to seeing you, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora get married." Sonic said, waving.

"Goodbye guys, I'll let you know of any updates to our plans." Tails said, waving back.

The screen went black as Sonic and Sally disabled their communication link, leaving Tails and Cosmo alone to do whatever they wanted for the rest of the night. Tails switched off his computer, feeling he had no further need for it as of now and he got up from his seat, stretching. Cosmo got up too and placed her hands on her soon-to-be-husband's strong, furry chest. Tails liked the way the Seedrian's hands felt on his chest. It gave him a very comforting feeling whenever he felt them. Tails placed his own hands on his soon-to-be-wife's shoulders, gazing into her eyes.

"I'm so looking forward to the big day...it's gonna be the best day of our lives." he said softly.

"I know my love, even better than the day we confessed our love for each other." Cosmo replied, "It feels so long ago now that I think about it..."

"It kinda is a long time ago sweetie." Tails replied, "It happened a year before the Dark Armada attacked, meaning eighteen years have passed since then. And now here we are, soon to be married!"

"It's like a dream come true at last." the Seedrian said, resting her head against Tails's chest and curling her hands around his waist, "I'm so happy and excited that I wonder if I'll burst before the wedding begins!"

"I'm sure you'll remain intact by then honey." the fox said, feeling his fiancée's hair, "And the best part is, all our friends will be there to see our marriage and we'll all be together again like one big happy family."

"I know dear...I know." Cosmo said, raising her head and lightly brushing her lips against her finance's cheek.

The engaged couple then locked lips and deeply embraced, enjoying the wonderful sensation that spread between them. This was their night to remember and very soon, they'd have a whole day to remember when their wedding began...

But not everybody in the world had such pleasant thoughts or agenda on their mind. Miles away from New Mobotropolis, another kind of plan was being formulated. But it wasn't for a wedding or anything even remotely as pleasant. This was a plan that was going to see people murdered and also see the wedding ruined.

Upon receiving a tip-off from Ramirez earlier, Scorn the Robian Scorpion had decided to call for a meeting with his comrades so he could discuss this plan and reveal who he was going to use to carry it out. It wasn't just him and his four comrades who were in the

meeting though. There were many more Mobians that were attending the meeting too.

Scorn entered the meeting room of his base where, as expected, he saw Fang, Breakdown, Swoop and Razoul all sitting down at a huge round table with eleven other Mobians all conversing amongst each other. The room itself was very spacious, easily able to fit one-hundred Mobians in without the feeling of being over-crowded, but was relatively featureless aside from the big round table in the centre. It was like being inside a big steel box for the occupants.

The eleven Mobians that occupied the room along with S.T.I.N.G.'s Big Five were not just any ordinary Mobians. Far from it. They were a collection of Mobians of various shapes and sizes and all hailing from various different places on Mobius.

There was a squid, a deer, a wolf, a lynx, a vulture, a bear, a water buffalo, an orca, a cobra and what appeared to be a robotic echidna head in a glass ball with tentacles tipped with three claws among them. Lyra the Leech, who had recently been made the eleventh member, was sitting at the table too and she looked ecstatically happy to be here. They were all sat, some patiently, some not so patiently, as they waited for the meeting to start. These insidious Mobians, ranging from land to the sea and even the air and coming from various animal groups were S.T.I.N.G.'s sinister group known as "The Elite Eleven". Scorn had warned Sonic that S.T.I.N.G. was not a small organization and the Elite Eleven proved it. Each member was in charge of their own chapter of S.T.I.N.G. and each member was as ruthless and cruel as the Big Five themselves were. They all had varying reasons for joining S.T.I.N.G., including the same reasons that Scorn and his main four had for founding the organization in the first place.

Scorn approached the table and sat down in his seat, which was larger than all the other chairs and looked more like a throne than an actual chair. A tense silence befell the Elite Eleven as Scorn held up a hand for silence. The meeting was now beginning.

"Ladies and gentlemen. You are all gathered here for a very important briefing." the roboticizied Eggman cultist announced.

"Since when do we have a briefing that doesn't fall under the category of important?" the wolf snickered.

Everybody just glared at him. The wolf clearly thought he was very funny but nobody else seemed to share that opinion. They all looked bored in response.

"I'd save your poor sense of humour for somebody who's sense of humour is equally as poor as yours Drago." Scorn snapped, "This isn't funny business you know."

The wolf, Drago, sighed but said nothing as his master continued.

"Ramirez continues to be a valuable asset to S.T.I.N.G. for he has given me an important update." the Robian Arachnid explained, "Apparently, four Royal Fighters are planning on getting married at some point, possibly a month or two from now. These four Royal Fighters are subjects: Tails, Cosmo, Sora and Ruben."

As he said the names, holographic images of the four Royal Fighters appeared, projected from a holographic projection sphere set in the middle of the table. The images were displayed in 3-D, looking so solid that it almost felt like you could touch them. The Elite Eleven plus Scorn's main four oohed in interest.

"I assume you've all read their files so you'll know who these heathens are." Scorn crooned, "They're all as big a criminal as Sonic himself is, forcing their morals onto the world and painting Eggman as the bad guy when all he was trying to do was improve the world. Tails is the biggest of the four given he is Sonic's main accomplice and best friend. Cosmo and Sora are equally as guilty in their crimes given they're his girlfriend and sister respectively but Ruben is no less a criminal as they are. All Royal Fighters are to be treated as equally guilty, except for Sonic and Sally. They're the biggest criminals of the lot..."

"Yes, we know, you've already told us this a thousand times master." the orca sighed in annoyance, his deep booming voice reverberating around the room, "Get to the point already! I've got my base in Holoska to finish!"

"I'll thank you for NOT interrupting me Ahklut." Scorn snapped viciously, "And I was getting to the point anyway. As I said, these four Mobians are soon to be wed. Tails is marrying Cosmo and Ruben is marrying Sora. It sickens me to think that these four criminals are allowed such a privilege. Not only have they gotten away with Eggman's downfall and murder for years but they're going to have something happy happen to them. Justice is certainly skewed if this is allowed to happen. So of course, we will sabotage this wedding, give these criminals what they deserve."

"Excuse me sir, pardon my intrusion," the deer said, raising her hand, "But why sabotage a wedding? This won't get us any closer to carrying out Eggman's vision will it?"

She wasn't in it to bring Eggman's vision to fruition but the deer thought she'd ask anyway. Circumstances beyond her control meant she had to appear loyal to S.T.I.N.G. whether she liked it or not.

"You are right to ask such a thing Clove, but you needn't worry." the S.T.I.N.G. leader said, "You see, there's more to this than just sabotaging a wedding. They plan to host it in Soleanna, which is where the Acorn Family is currently on vacation in. We can do more than just sabotage the wedding...we can kill Sonic the Hedgehog as well. This will be a sabotage and assassination mission and those Royal Fighters have set up the perfect situation for us to carry it out in."

There were a bunch of murmurs among the Mobians as they took this in. What a situation was this! A wedding in Soleanna that could get them closer to killing Sonic! Even when S.T.I.N.G. wasn't manipulating anything, events still seemed to play into their hands.

"So this will be our mission: once the date of the wedding is confirmed, we will assassinate Sonic the Hedgehog." Scorn declared, "His death will lower the hopes of the Royal Fighters and make them more fallible, especially when a day as happy as a wedding is brought to a crushing halt by it. Nobody will have hopes for a peaceful world when we make our move and then they'll embrace our vision. A world of Robians will not be as out of control as a world of Mobians."

"So who's going to carry out this mission?" Drago asked, hoping the answer would be him.

"Two Grandmasters whom I know very well will succeed in this mission." Scorn answered, "Ahklut, you and Lyra are going to carry out the mission."

"YIPPEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!" Lyra squealed, bouncing up and down in her seat, "Eeeeeeee, thanks so much daddy! Hooray, I get to kill Sonic and ruin a wedding, and possibly get dollies too!"

"What?!" Ahklut cried out indignantly, "You mean to tell me that I have to work with this trash?! You must be joking master!"

All the other Grandmasters just shook their heads pityingly or laughed at the orca's predicament. None of them wanted to work with Lyra either so they considered Ahklut unfortunate that he was the one who had to work with the leech. An act of cruelty is what they considered it to be.

"Do I look or sound like I am joking?" the scorpion snarled, "I have given your assignments and that is the end of it. You two WILL work together or I will have you replaced with another Holoska resident Ahklut. Do I make myself clear?"

Ahklut clenched his fists in anger, clearly ready to attack Lyra or even Scorn himself. But he sighed loudly and lay back in his seat. He hadn't fought for a position in the Elite Eleven just to be kicked out like this. He'd rather put up with Lyra than lose his position.

"Yes master..." he sighed.

"Don't worry daddy, I'll make Free Willy over here behave himself if he tries to attack me." Lyra said sweetly.

"I know, that's why you're going to be his partner." Scorn murmured, "Before Sonic is assassinated, you may take anybody you see to be your..."dollies" as you put it. With any luck, you might be able to kidnap the brides."

"I hope so! Cosmo and Sora would be the best dollies ever!" the artificially created Mobian squealed, "It'll be an honour to humiliate those Eggman-hating, Sonic-worshipping, ass-kissing wankers for siding with the enemy!"

"I'll admit, I kinda wanna see that." Ahklut purred, grinning like a shark.

"So it's settled then. You two will destroy the wedding and kill Sonic." Scorn declared, "Use whatever methods you need to carry out the murder but TRY not to kill too many others at the wedding. We want as many people alive as possible for Project: Robius."

"Kill the king, ruin the wedding, keep collateral damage and other casualties to a minimum. Got it." the orca declared, "We'll be ready to mobilize as soon as we get confirmation on when this wedding happens."

"We'll turn this wedding into a funeral! Hee, hee, hee!" Lyra piped.

"Indeed." Scorn purred sinisterly, "The meeting is done, you're all dismissed." he announced.

With that said and done, he got up from his seat along with his main four and walked out of the room...

A double wedding's going to happen and we're invited! But the wedding could end in tragedy when S.T.I.N.G. gets involved...

Tune in next time as we get a sad case of the "Wedding Bell Blues"...

Double Weddings: Chapter 2

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 2: Wedding Bell Blues

Sonic had kept his promise to Tails and had told Nicole the Holo-Lynx to spread the word to every Royal Fighter team around Mobius so they could be informed of the glorious news that four Royal Fighters were about to be married.

Every single team had gotten the message from old teams such as Team Adabat, Megapolis and Nekronopolis and of course, Team Chun-Nan to new teams that had formed after Enerjak's demise such as Team Mercia. The first team to receive the news was of course, Team New Mobotropolis, with the message spreading around the world to find any member that wasn't still living in the city now. Team Chaotix, who were still living in the city, had gotten the message too and had been quick to give all their praise and congrats for the soon-to-be-wed couple. Even Knuckles and Shade had received the message and had promised to attend with their daughter. Sora and Ruben had passed the message on about it as well, helping to spread the good news, mostly through Chun-Nan, and informing everybody that there were going to be two weddings and not one. So now the entire R.F.S. knew that there was going to be a double-wedding, a glorious event that would see Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora bound together by marriage. It was quite possibly the biggest thing that had happened to the R.F.S. since the wedding of Sonic and Sally many years ago. The Freedom Fighting Organization had seen Wilson and Mandy get married during the Eggman War, then it had seen Matilda and Bladefeather get married during the Dark Armada War and then it had seen Sonic and Sally get married after Enerjak had been defeated. Now it was going to see Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora get married, and all at once no less. It was going to be a very special occasion and nobody wanted to miss it.

Of course, the wedding had been planned to occur very soon since the two couples didn't want people to wait too long for it and with any hope, it could come and go without S.T.I.N.G. getting involved. So the schedule had been set for the last day of the next month and not a day later. Once the date had been announced, the R.F.S. had been updated so the invited guests knew when to start preparing for the big day. So the next few weeks for many of the Royal Fighters had been spent shopping for suits and dresses to wear but not once did any of them let go of what was important. True a wedding was about to happen but that didn't mean they could lower their guard. S.T.I.N.G. could strike any moment, even while the wedding was approaching, and the service couldn't afford another attack like what had happened to Castle Acorn.

Even Sonic was being doubly cautious of everything, studying the guest list several times to make sure nobody he didn't recognize was invited. The list didn't change no matter how many times he read it, meaning that he could relax and be content with the fact only people he knew were coming. He, Sally and Zoe were now at the Soleanna Palace to see the Royal Family and discuss how things were going to go. The Duke and Duchess of Soleanna had been honoured to hear that the two couples wanted their wedding held in their city and had been keen to arrange things as perfectly as possible. Their daughter, Princess Elise had been thrilled and was equally as keen to make sure that everything was perfect for the grand event.

Right about now, she was talking with Zoe while her parents were preparing for the ceremony. There were only a couple of days left until the big day so everybody was working hard to finish all preparations before time ran out.

"It's been a while since my family's held a wedding here." Elise said brightly, "We're still very honoured that your Uncle Tails, his fiancee Cosmo and Ruben and Sora want to be wed in our city. This'll be a moment that Soleanna will go down in history for!"

"I bet it will." Zoe piped, "The history books will tell of the day that four Royal Fighters held a double-wedding here! I'm so excited that I

might burst!"

"Don't do that yet Zoe, Tails needs you to be ring bearer remember?" Elise chuckled, playfully nudging Zoe.

"I remember, don't worry!" Zoe retorted, playfully nudging Elise back.

"So how's things been going since...you know...that day?" the Soleanna princess asked, worried that she was spoiling the mood by asking such a thing.

"Things have been pretty quiet." the New Mobotropolis princess replied, "It still sucks that Castle Acorn burned down but I've been enjoying our stay away in Soleanna, especially since we've expanded our holiday so we can be here for the wedding and help prepare! Also I'm having less stomach aches so that's a plus." she added, glancing down at her bare belly.

It was true. The belly-aches had all since disappeared over the weeks to the point where Zoe couldn't even remember the last time it had happened. Unknown to her, that was because the bug had fully settled down inside her and was no longer moving. Now nobody would ever find it or ever know about it. Elise nodded, smiling brightly.

"That's good to hear." she said, "It really sucks when you get aches and pains like that for no real reason. And given the wedding's in two days, we need you in your best health for it."

"That is very true." Zoe replied, "Man I can't wait! Uncle Tails and Aunt Cosmo are gonna be married! And so is Uncle Ruben and Aunt Sora too!"

"I know. A double-wedding with four of New Mobotropolis's most famous heroes. What could be better?" Elise sighed happily.

The two princess nodded agreeably. In two days time, the wedding of the year, no, possibly the century would begin and everybody

would be there to witness it. And best of all, everything was going to go as planned...

...or so they thought.

If anybody had been curious enough to check out the new arrivals that had booked a room in the Soleanna Sun Hotel that was very near the Soleanna Palace, they would've seen that three suspicious individuals had moved into Room 8643 on the top floor of the establishment. The Soleanna Sun Hotel was a five-star hotel that had been erected by the Duke and Duchess that had ruled the city before Elise's parents had taken over from them. It was said to be one of the most luxurious hotels in all of Mobius, not just in Soleanna, thanks to its attentive service, vintage decor and amenities that made every day worth spending in the hotel. Some people enjoyed staying there so much that they'd often try to extend their holidays just so they could stay longer. The inside of the hotel looked more like a Grand Palace than a hotel thanks to its marble floors, marble support beams and gleaming chandeliers that twinkled in the light. There was even an artificial waterfall feature in the main dining hall that added to the impressive nature of the place.

The hotel had been a favourite holiday place of many rich or famous Mobians, including the Royal Fighters themselves. Just last week, Dark Cat the Leo-Lynx and Kiara the Cheetah had stayed in the hotel for a holiday. But the three that had rented a room in the Soleanna Sun Hotel were not rich, nor famous Mobians. In fact, if anybody had even bothered to investigate them, they would've realized that they weren't even good people in the first place. The three new residents...were all S.T.I.N.G. members.

Two of them were part of the Elite Eleven, Akhlut the Orca and Lyra the Leech while the third was Ramirez the Chameleon, who had managed to get into the hotel by disguising himself as a female leech who passed off as Lyra's mother. Ahklut had pretended to be her father, something that sickened him to no end and was relieved

to be able to drop out of character now the three were alone in their room.

Akhlut was enormous, one of the largest Mobians currently roaming the planet. It was expected from an orca to be huge but Akhlut was larger than even the average orca. His body was overdeveloped to the point it looked as if his muscles were constantly fighting each other whenever he moved. He was very broad and top heavy with his legs looking much slimmer than his upper body. He had black eyes with green pupils and wore a yellow zip-up shirt with a metal apparatus on his back with two straps that reached over his shoulders and chest. He wore metal arm gauntlets with green circular holes in the wrist sections, chunky metal boots that had the same circular holds in the shin sections and a metal fin attachment that slipped over his normal, organic fin on his head. There was a circular orb on the fin that perched above his eyes but it wasn't just there for decoration. It was a weapon that fired psychic beams that could disorient, harm or blow his enemies away. This made him a fearsome fighter, giving him psychic abilities combined with brute strength, making him a valuable ally to S.T.I.N.G. and a very valuable asset for the Elite Eleven.

As part of the Eleven, Akhlut was in charge of a S.T.I.N.G. operation in Holoska and he longed to be back there. He hated the sunny atmosphere of Soleanna and missed the snow and ice of his natural habitat. The icy cold seas around the snow-blanketed country were home to him and made him feel more comfortable than being up on the land and walking on solid ground, dirt, tarmac and other substances instead of snow and ice. When this deed was done, he would be quick to return home to his beloved Holoska.

Lyra was skipping around the room merrily, admiring the pretty sights around her. The room was very luxurious and built to impress with its fancy wallpaper decorations, comfortable beds and polished furniture. Even the floor looked nice. There were amenities for entertainment in the room such as a television set and some games in a nearby cupboard but nobody planned to use them. Ramirez had

switched off his holographic disguise emitter, returning to his normal form and he flopped down on one of the nearby sofas as if he was desperate for a sleep. Ahklut understood him, he had hated pretending to be Lyra's mother as much as he'd hated pretending to be the father. Why did Scorn have to make them work with that freak of nature with the childish personality?! Ahklut slumped beside him while Lyra bounced on the bed as if it was a trampoline.

"Whee, springy and bouncy!" she hollered, "This is my bed, this is my bed and you can't have iiiiiiitttt!" she sung tauntingly.

"You can have it freak." Ramirez muttered, "I'd rather sleep on the floor than in a bed you're occupying."

"Oh don't be a grumpy bastard Ramirez! It's not my fault I bagged the bed first!" the leech giggled, still bouncing up and down on the bed.

The chameleon rolled his eyes in annoyance and ran his fingers up and down his forehead, feeling the area where his Eggman Empire logo tattoo was. Boy he was looking forward to this being over! He'd personally protest against ever having to work with Lyra again next time he met up with Scorn. Working with the abomination was like an act of punishment as far as he was concerned. Akhlut seemed to share the same opinion.

"I know Ramirez, it's gonna be hell to put up with that woman-child for the time being..." the killer whale sighed, "Still, she is useful to our cause so there's something good that'll come out of this at least."

"I know, I just hope it'll be worth it..." Ramirez moaned, "Sonic and his friends are all hypocritical fascists who deserve to be punished for their crimes but frankly, I'm considering taking them over Lyra. She's so fucking annoying!"

"No I'm not, you're annoying!" Lyra retorted, "Annoyingly grumpy that is! Now quit talking shit about me or I'm telling daddy and then he'll kick you out of S.T.I.N.G. for not obeying orders and let Sonic and

friends throw you in jail!" the leech threatened. Her voice had been sweet and innocent but her words had been cryptic and threatening. The fact she had said it in such a girlish tone of voice just made the threat even creepier.

The orca and chameleon recoiled in fright. They couldn't let Lyra do this to them. ANYTHING was better than being locked up in prison forever and they both knew it. Sighing, Ramirez glared at Lyra. She only smiled sweetly at him in return.

"Fine...I apologize for my disgraceful behaviour towards you..." he sighed.

"That's better!" Lyra sneered as if talking to a child, "Now be a good boy and get planning the assassination with panda whale boy while I just play with myself!"

She giggled childishly as she got up from the bed and headed over to the cupboard to find some games to play with. Akhlut sighed irritably. Why did Lyra NEVER call him by his actual name? He wasn't "Free Willy" or "panda whale boy"! Did she do it on purpose just to annoy him? She seemed to be a bit of a troll at heart and Akhlut had to fight off the urge to rip Lyra apart piece by piece. Sighing, he ignored the artificially created Mobian and looked back over at Ramirez.

"So as you know, me and Lyra have been tasked with running the operation that'll see the Royal Fighter wedding ruined and Sonic killed." the orca explained, "And you also know that's why you're here too. You can blend in with the crowd easily and give us the signal to attack thanks to your holographic disguise emitter."

"Indeed I can." Ramirez gloated, showing his comrade the watch that he was so proud to own.

"Now the plan I have is that you will disguise yourself as a guard so you can watch how everything goes." Akhlut explained, "I will be on the roof of the hotel with my weapon in hand, ready to take out the

king. You will give me the signal and then I'll prepare for the kill. But as you know, S.T.I.N.G. wants little to no civilian deaths since dead people can't become Robians to embrace Scorn's vision. So that's where...she comes in."

He glanced briefly at Lyra, who tossed a Monopoly board game over her shoulder, spilling the contents over the floor.

"BO-RING! Don't they have anything fun to play with in here?!" the leech whined as she rummaged through the cupboard, "I wish I'd brought my dollies with me!"

The orca turned back to the chameleon, keen to forget what he had just seen.

"Lyra will use her special powers to gain control over the Duke, Duchess and Princess of Soleanna." Akhlut explained, "She'll then make the Duke demand that King Sonic come forward and tell everybody else to back away. Then she'll make the Duke say "This maybe a day of marriage for four special Mobians but this is also a special day for the king...for it's his FUNERAL day!" That'll be my cue and then...ha, ha, ha, ha...the tarmac will be stained with Sonic's blood!"

"Oh yes...yes it will!" Ramirez cackled, his face twisted into a sadistic grin of pure pleasure.

"And the best part is we'll be able to slip away completely unnoticed." Akhlut declared, "Nobody will know that we did the deed, they'll just blame Scorn and his four comrades for it, leaving me, you and Lyra completely below suspicion for nobody knows about us, thus keeping the illusion that S.T.I.N.G. isn't as large as it truly is!"

"You got that right my sea-faring friend." Ramirez agreed, "Oh my beloved Fang will be so proud of me when I come home to tell her the good news..." he sighed dreamily as he thought about his love interest.

Akhlut just rolled his eyes and sighed. He didn't understand the concept of love and affection like what Ramirez displayed for Fang. He just loved cracking skulls, spilling blood and waging wars. He valued his soldiers but only because they were a means to an end in his eyes. Love was a pointless emotion for him.

"Yes...I'm sure she will..." the sea-mammal said, carefully choosing his words, "Anyway, you said that the wedding is a couple of days away. Are you sure that that's how long we have?"

"Of course I'm sure!" the reptile snapped, "I spied on Tails and Cosmo and heard them confirm the date! How dare you doubt my efficiency as a spy you conceited, water-dwelling, blowpipe spewing big head!"

That was a mistake. If there was one thing Akhlut didn't tolerate, it was being insulted. The enraged killer whale got up to his feet and grabbed Ramirez with a hand the size of a tennis racket. The chameleon cried out as Akhlut *lifted him up off the sofa with one hand!* The orca had him by the throat and was throttling him tightly.

"If you don't want me to kill you now, I suggest you change your attitude towards me and drop the insults..." he snarled, "Otherwise S.T.I.N.G. can find a new spy!"

"OK...OK...I'm sorry, I'm SORRY!" Ramirez croaked weakly, fighting for breath, "Put me down...I c-can't breathe!"

"If you ever insult me again, you won't be breathing ever again..." Akhlut warned, putting Ramirez back down on the sofa.

Lyra had heard the scuffle and had folded her arms, tapping her foot as if she was a stern mother telling off her child. She was not at all pleased with how Akhlut had just treated Ramirez.

"Hey ice-licker! Don't you ever threaten our comrades like that again!" she snapped, her tone no longer girly and ditzy...but serious and angry. It sounded very surreal coming out of this girl, "If you

display that hostility ever again, I'm gonna suck your blood dry and tell daddy why I had to kill you! We're supposed to be a team so you better damn well treat your comrades with more respect or you're gonna be one sorry mess at the end of it!"

Akhlut had been taken aback by Lyra's sudden change in tone and the fact she had the gall to tell him off. HIM! It was humiliating enough having to work with her but being SCOLDED by her was even worse. He was temped to squash Lyra flat but he knew full well that if he made a wrong move, the leech could kill him and it would look as if he'd merely collapsed. He'd be bone-dry of any blood when she'd finished and he'd be sent to the afterlife with the knowledge that he'd ended his life as good for the freak. And Scorn would applaud her for the murder, what a horrible way to be remembered. Sighing, he sat back down on the sofa and massaged his temples.

"You're right...my behaviour was uncalled for." Akhlut sighed, "I'm sorry Lyra."

"That's OK Free Willy!" the leech piped, suddenly back into her usual girly personality, "Now then, would you and Ramirez like to play tiddlywinks with me?" she suddenly asked, holding up a box for the game she had just mentioned.

The two S.T.I.N.G. members shrugged. Why not? It would suit their role as Lyra's parents and make them look credible should anybody peek into the room and see what was happening. It was humiliating but at least it served a purpose in making them less suspicious. Last thing they needed was the hotel staff telling the royals they had some sinister guests that might require Sonic's attention. They only had to put up with it for two days and then the plan could go into action...and Sonic would be dead at last...

Later that day, Princess Elise went back into Soleanna Palace to let her parents know that the preparation were nearly done. The Mobian jaguar had enjoyed helping out with the set-up today and was even now still tingling with excitement, unable to contain herself as she

awaited for the big day to arrive. Despite being well into her twenties, the judo-princess felt like an excited little girl again. She hadn't felt like this in a long time.

"Man this wedding's gonna be a blast, and it's happening here no less!" Elise piped to herself, "I sure hope I don't explode from the excitement before the day comes!"

She roamed through the hallway, listening to her bare paws slapping against the marble floor. Her parents were presumably upstairs so ascended up the grand staircase to the second floor of the palace to look for them. She approached one of the many doors in the corridor and opened one of them. This door led to the library and she walked in, wondering if her parents were there. She had been lucky to guess this for as she walked into the library, she spotted them right away. The Duke and Duchess were indeed in the library but much to Elise's confusion, they didn't appear to be looking for any books or even reading for that matter. Elise just shrugged. It was nothing, maybe they were just talking to one another.

She walked up towards them, still grinning from ear-to-ear. However, as she got closer to the Duke and Duchess, she noticed something else odd. They seemed a little distant as if they hadn't even noticed their daughter had walked into the room. That made the princess feel a little uneasy. She still approached her parents, not wanting to jump to conclusions just yet. They had to be fine, maybe she was just imagining things.

"Hi mom, hi dad!" she cooed, "Preparations are nearly done now! Just thought you'd like to know."

"That's great dear." The Duke said, his voice flat and emotionless as if he was a talking programme on a computer rather than an actual Mobian.

That really set the alarm bells ringing. Elise stepped back, crept out by her father's robot-like tone of voice. The Duke NEVER spoke to her like this! What was going on with him?! Elise then noticed

something about her parents that definitely didn't look right. Their eyes were unfocused and looked very lifeless. That didn't match their personalities at all, her parents were very full of life. Now, their eyes had drained of all life and colour. And their faces looked a little...pale. They almost looked like undead zombies with their lifeless eyes and pale faces. Elise swallowed nervously, her ears drooping back against her head.

"Um...mom? Dad? Are you OK?" she asked cautiously, "You both don't look well."

"We're fine dearest." the Duchess replied, her voice flat and emotionless just like her husband.

"No, you're not! You're both ill, I just know it!" Elise snapped, "What's wrong with you two? Why do you look like ghosts and why do you sound like you don't have a personality anymore?"

"You're overreacting honey. There's nothing wrong with us." the Duchess insisted.

"Please don't fret, we're fine." the Duke added.

To Elise, it sounded like the exact same person had spoken. It didn't sound like she'd heard two different people talking. What was going on and why were her parents acting like this?! Elise stepped back nervously.

"I'm...I'm gonna call a doctor." she said, "You may think you're OK mom and dad but you're not. You need medical attention and..."

The princess was cut off as suddenly, something jabbed into her back and shoulders. Elise flinched instinctively but was suddenly powerless to move as something injected itself into her. It was a bunch of stingers injecting venom into her veins. And the stingers...belonged to Lyra the Leech. The sinister S.T.I.N.G. member had sneaked into the palace earlier and taken control of the Duke and Duchess ready for the big plan the day after tomorrow.

She had been hiding behind one of the bookcases while Elise had talked to her parents and had just come out to inject her. Now Elise was falling under her control thanks to the venom she was injecting into her. The leech couldn't resist having a little snack at the same time though so she bit Elise on the arm and sucked out some of her blood. Of course, she couldn't kill the princess or she'd have everybody questioning what happened to her, thus compromising the plan so she only took a small amount. Elise went pale as some of her blood was sapped away but then Lyra let go of her arm and took her stingers away.

The princess had fallen under the same kind of control her parents were under. Her eyes had turned grey and were drained of any life. She looked like a living corpse just like the duke and duchess did. Her expression was vacant as Lyra circled her, admiring the beautiful jaguar. Her face twisted into a dirty smile as she traced a finger around Elise's waist.

"Boy you'll make a GORGEOUS dolly Princess What's-Your-Name..." she hissed gleefully, "I'm gonna take you home with me when this is over! Then I'll play with you and dress you up and make you look all pretty! Mommy will take very good care of you spotty..."

She then patted Elise's face, the princess not reacting to the gesture. She just stood still as if wondering what to do.

"But first, mommy has a VERY special job for you..." Lyra purred, her face so close to Elise's she almost looked as if she was about to kiss her.

"Please tell me what it is mommy." Elise droned, her voice as flat and emotionless as her parents...

Very soon, the big day had arrived at last. Soleanna was now seeing activity bigger than any it had seen in a while with a huge crowd of invited guests filing towards the Soleanna Palace to see what was soon to be a very historical marriage. It had been years since any

Royal Fighters had been married, which made this an event nobody could possibly miss. All the Royal Fighters in the R.F.S. had managed to arrive with not a single one of them absent from the crowd. All the teams were there, especially Team New Mobotropolis. They had all come together, some of them here with relatives of their own such as Wilson the Dog and Mandy the Mouse, who had brought their young son and daughter, Daniel and Rachel. Even Bunnie Rabboh (formerly Rabbot) had attended with her Uncle Beauregard coming along with her. Knuckles and Shade had also brought their own child, a pretty young echidna named Sadie. They were all dressed very smartly, wearing either dapper suits or pretty dresses that brought out the best of their appearances.

King Sonic and Queen Sally were standing by, waiting for the soon-to-be-weds to arrive. Princess Zoe stood by them, carrying the rings on a satin cushion. She looked very excited, eager to hand out the rings to Tails and Cosmo. For Ruben and Sora, they had asked Empress Matilda and Emperor Bladefeather to be their best man and bridesmaid respectively with Mushu the Iguana, Bladefeather's best friend, as their ring-bearer. He stood by silently, waiting for Ruben and Sora to arrive. Matilda had brought her two children, a son named Jaycee and a daughter named Miko, to the wedding and the two were currently standing in the crowd chatting to any Mobians their age. The two royal families had of course been happy to see each other and were passing their waiting minutes away with a chat of their own.

"How's that Kung-Fu School of yours going lately Tilly?" Sonic asked inquisitively.

"I'm still hoping we can come around to see it one day." Sally said brightly, "I'd love to see your hard work in person."

"I'm honoured you feel that way Queen Sally." Matilda replied, bowing, "As for you Sonic, the school's going very well thank you. I've had many promising students sign up and many of them are learning well. Just yesterday we got some new students. One of them is named Monkey Khan and he's showing a lot of promise so

far. He seems to quite like my daughter though." she added thoughtfully.

"Why wouldn't he? Miko's as cute as a button!" Sonic said cheerfully, "She's bound to catch somebody's attention!"

"Sonic, just be careful how you go about this..." Sally warned, "You could offend Matilda."

"Ease your nerves your majesty, Sonic's words are not in anyway offensive to us." Bladefeather reassured, "In fact, I'm on-board with any of my children finding their own loved one just as me and Matilda did. Though I do very much comprehend my wife's uncertainty. It's a natural reaction amongst parents to be cautious about what boy or girl their child wishes to develop a relationship with."

"Man you still talk too much!" the king hedgehog snickered, "But in all seriousness, I totally get that. I'd probably be the same if Zoe told me she has a boyfriend!"

He glanced down at Zoe, who smirked at him in response. Her face suggested she was thinking "Nice try dad but I'm not looking up any boys yet". The emperor and empress chuckled in response.

"I imagine your daughter turns a lot of heads when she walks by." Bladefeather joked, "She is quite lovely herself."

"Aww, thanks!" Zoe giggled bashfully, "That's very kind of you emperor!"

"You're most welcome child." the falcon replied kindly, "So, care to apprise me about how you've been since S.T.I.N.G. showed its hand?"

"I can't tell you how heartbroken I was when I got your message many weeks ago..." Matilda sighed, "I thought we were going to have

peace forever but then we hear that Eggman's got supporters. I just hope our children never meet S.T.I.N.G..." she added, shuddering

"With any luck empress, they won't." Zoe muttered, "I'm just thankful mom and dad came to rescue me when they kidnapped me. I've been very well since that day in answer to your question by the way." she added, "My belly-aches stopped at last and now I feel pretty much normal again. And all in time for the wedding!"

"You must've been looking forward to it dear." the royal mongoose replied.

"That's an understatement!" Sally chuckled, "She wouldn't stop going on about it ever since Tails and Cosmo gave us the news!"

"I can only imagine how excited she'll be when it's her own wedding one day." Sonic joked.

Then suddenly, a faint humming sound caught everybody's attention and made them look around to see what it was. To their delight, it was an arriving hover-limo that was making the sound. The limousine was very sleek in shape with a lot of smooth lines all around and narrow headlights. The limo had a hover-board attached underneath it which levitated the long vehicle up off the ground when it was activated. There was a purple light that illuminated the ground it hovered above wherever it went. The limo didn't belong to anybody, it had been hired for the occasion. Whoever had hired it clearly wanted to travel in comfort. As the limo pulled up, it settled down on the ground and the door opened up. To everybody's surprise, the person in the limo was none other than Tails himself.

As the twin-tailed fox stepped out, Sonic and his family could see that he was dressed very smartly indeed. He was dressed in a blue blazer with dark blue trousers to go with it. He wore a black shirt and a red tie and he also wore black shoes that were polished so brightly they seemed to gleam in the sunlight. Tails had chosen to wear blue rather than black for he wanted to look less traditional and more distinctive from other grooms at weddings. Sonic smiled at the sight

of his best friend. He'd never seen Tails looking so grown-up before. Tails walked up to his best man and bridesmaid and shook their hands. Despite the fact his wedding was here, he looked nervous, a common reaction from a soon-to-be-wed.

"Hey everybody." he said, trying to inject some enthusiasm to his voice.

"Top of the morning Tails." Sonic replied, "I bet Cosmo's gonna love seeing you dressed like that!"

"You look very smart Tails, a proper gentleman even." Sally complimented.

"You almost look like a prince Uncle Tails!" Zoe squealed delightedly.

"Heh, thanks guys." Tails replied modestly, "I really wanted to look my best today. I can't wait to see Cosmo, Ruben and Sora when they arrive, they'll all look great too!"

"Ruben should be here very shortly." Matilda said helpfully, "He departed from Chun-Nan not long after me and my family left."

Then suddenly, right on cue, something else arrived and stopped beside the limo that Tails had just come in. Being a Chun-Nan resident, Ruben had decided to arrive for his wedding in something more traditional to his country than anything else. A Mobian pheasant wearing a coolie hat and pulling a cart had pulled in. It was a two-wheeled, old-fashioned method of transportation though this model was clearly built for comfort thanks to the curtains on either side and the soft chairs. The cart was where Ruben was sitting right now and he stepped out of it as soon as the cart man had come to a stop. As soon as Ruben had departed from Chun-Nan to Soleanna, he had been brought across the sea by boat and upon arrival, the cart man had taken him from the docks to the sun-worshipping city in the cart.

Despite this very Chun-Nan method of arrival, Ruben himself wasn't dressed very traditionally. Traditionally for his country that is. He was instead dressed in a light black blazer and white shirt with accompanying black tie. He looked more local to New Mobotropolis than Chun-Nan in those clothes, which he didn't mind since Ruben had wanted to blend in with Tails. Wearing a robe would've just made him stand out too much. Ruben approached Matilda and Bladefeather and embraced them both.

"I'm honoured you two could be here today." he said graciously.

"The pleasure's all ours Ruben." Matilda said kindly, "You look very, very smart Ruben." she added approvingly.

"He sure does." Sonic agreed, "Though I honestly expected him to be wearing some kind of robe." he added, chuckling.

"I don't wanna be the centre of attention Sonic. This isn't just my wedding remember." Ruben retorted, smiling cheekily, "I wanted to look more traditional for most people than just for myself so I decided to dress like this."

"The clothes really suit you Ruben." Tails complimented, "You proper look like a groom today."

"As do you." the water-panther said in return, "I can't wait to see Sora. I've always wondered how lovely she's going to look in a wedding dress."

"She showed me a picture last night." the fox replied, "Believe me Ruben, you're gonna LOVE her when she arrives." he winked.

Being Sora's brother and all, it made perfect sense as to why she had shown him her wedding dress first. Ruben nodded, knowing that Tails was right on that fact. He was going to love his fiancée when she arrived. And thankfully, the wait wasn't going to last much longer.

A couple of minutes passed before the final arrivals pulled into the palace. Said arrivals were making their entrance by riding in what appeared to be a hovering car, but this one of a luxury build instead of a standard model. To anyone from Earth, the vehicle would've reminded them of a Rolls Royce model, just equipped with a hoverpad instead of wheels and looking much sleeker and more modern. The car was silver and decorated with bows, symbolizing that the brides were inside it. Tails and Ruben both beamed. Their soon-to-be-wives had arrived at last.

Cosmo and Sora both stepped out of the car as the driver got out and opened the doors for them. The sight of these two wedding belles earned a lot of faces turning in their direction. Cosmo and Sora both looked stunning, the two women dressed in beautiful dresses that made them both look radiant in the eyes of many beholders.

Cosmo was wearing a dress that was more traditional to her long lost home-planet of Greengate. It was green and had silver trimmings around the waist. There was a red flower, a real one not a fake one, attached to one of her shoulder straps. If one was to lift up her dress, they would see she was wearing green high heels with leaf patterns on the toe sections. She also wore matching green gloves with a flower wristband around her right wrist. At a Seedrian wedding, this was what the bride would normally wear and to respect her origins, Tails had decided to let Cosmo dress like this. She had gone to a tailor and requested him to make it to the design she wanted and it seemed the tailor's hard work had paid off.

Sora looked more traditional, wearing the usual white wedding dress that one would expect from a bride. But her dress had gold trimmings around the waist and skirt section, forming attractive patterns that added to the dress's appearance. She had styled her hair so it looked very neat and tidy, which seemed to add to her already attractive appearance. Sora was still wearing the engagement bracelet that Ruben had given her when he'd proposed.

The grooms both stared with awe in their eyes as their brides approached. Cosmo walked up to Tails and put her hands on his shoulders. Sora walked up to Ruben and did the same. The fox and water panther put their arms around their brides, staring into their eyes lovingly.

"Cosmo...I've never see you looking so beautiful before." Tails whispered, "You look wonderful." he commented, tracing his fingers down her leafy hair.

Cosmo beamed with pleasure.

"Thank you so much Tails..." the Seedrian whispered, "And you look very handsome in your blue suit." she complimented, feeling his whiskers.

Tails blushed, pleased to be receiving such a comment from his fiancée. He had known Cosmo would like the blue suit for she was very fond of the colour due to its pace symbolism.

"Sora, I've said many times that you're beautiful." Ruben said as he fingered a lock of Sora's hair, "And right now, you look more beautiful than a Chun-Nan sunset. That dress is amazing!"

"You're such a charmer water-boy." Sora giggled, massaging her fiancé's shoulder, "As for you, well, you look like you'd fit into the M.S.I.U. in those clothes. My foster dad used to dress in smart black clothes like that."

Ruben smiled modestly. A compliment like that meant a lot to him given he knew exactly how much Sora's foster father, the late Martin Sumdac, had meant to her.

"I can't tell you guys how lucky you are." Sonic complimented, "Getting married to such dashing looking brides, I bet it's like a dream come true for you two!"

"Cosmo, Sora, you two really do look wonderful." Sally added kindly, "You both remind me of when I was getting married to Sonic many years back.

"Look at you two, you're like a pair of princesses!" Zoe chipped in, staring admirably at Cosmo and Sora.

"Heh, heh, thank you very, very much Sonic, Sally and Zoe." Cosmo replied.

"It means a lot to hear you say that, all three of you." Sora added.

"We're just saying what's true ladies." Sonic said modestly.

"Has my security feature been set-up?" the vixen suddenly asked.

"It sure has spy-gal." the king said, winking, "We've got your orb flying around and scanning people to make sure nobody's in disguise or hiding anything. If anybody's thinking about sabotaging the wedding, they can kiss their plans goodbye!"

"That's great Sonic." Tails put in, "Although it's unlikely S.T.I.N.G. will do anything today, it never hurts to be prepared."

Then the wedding marches began to play, the organ music amplified all around by speakers set up in strategic areas around the palace grounds. The marriage itself was going to take place outside, something requested by Cosmo for she loved being outdoors and thought being married outdoors would be more special. The Duke and Duchess stood at the bottom of the steps leading to their palace with Elise beside them. The Duke was going to be the vicar that would wed the four Mobians here today. Tails and Cosmo began to walk forward, arm-in-arm with Ruben and Sora repeating the same motion. The wedding marches still played as the two couples began to approach the Duke. All the guests watched them go by, some shedding tears of joy and some taking photographs as they passed. The big moment was here and it was going to be wonderful.

But as the four Mobians came closer to the Soleanna Royal Family, they all noticed something odd straight away. The three jaguars looked deathly pale as if they were supposed to be sick in bed rather than out here in the open air. Their eyes looked vacant, not seeming to notice that anybody was coming. That made them feel uneasy. Was the family ill? But then the Duke blinked a few times and looked directly at them as if realizing that somebody was approaching. That made the couples relax. Maybe everything was alright after-all.

But then Sora noticed something that didn't seem quite right to her. In the corner of her eye, she'd seen something glisten. It was as if the sun had just shone on a shiny surface. Her years as a spy had taught her to be suspicious of these things for occurrences like these turned out to be hidden snipers with guns. She looked up but saw nothing there. Shrugging, she decided to ignore it for now. It had been nothing, Sora decided. She had just been imagining things.

But Sora hadn't in fact imagined anything. What she had seen really had been the sun glistening off of the barrel of a laser rifle. Akhlut was standing on the roof of the Soleanna Sun Hotel and was looking down at the happy scene below. Now the couples were approaching the Duke, he had take the perfect opportunity to set up his kill. He had brought with him a Cosmic Laser Blaster 2.7 Model Rifle with him. The gun was said to be the best weapon an assassin on Mobius could use thanks to its lightweight construction that made carrying easy and its powerful laser blasts that made death almost instant. The gun was long with a circular barrel and two chunky structures on the sides that made the rifle look bulkier than it would've looked without them. Akhlut admired the weapon he held in his hands. It was a glorious killing tool and he was looking forward to using it. Grinning maliciously, he took up position and peered through the scope. Now he had to wait for Lyra's little puppets to deliver the signal. Excitement coursed through his huge body as he prepared for his part in the plan. He was going to kill Sonic! S.T.I.N.G. would worship him for the deed and maybe even promote him as one of the main leaders instead of making him part of the Elite Twelve!

Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora stopped and stood still just before the Duke, who seemed to acknowledge the fact he had four people just in front of him right now. His face broke into a broad grin, Lyra's doing, as he addressed the crowd.

"People of Mobius." he announced, "We are gathered here today for a very, very special occasion. We are here today to witness the marriage of four very special people. But before the wedding can commence, I would like it if King Sonic the Hedgehog could come forward please. I wish to thank him for helping to arrange all this. Tails, Cosmo, Ruben, Sora, step back if you please."

That made everybody murmur in confusion. This didn't usually happen at a wedding. Is this a Soleanna tradition? Sonic himself just shrugged and came forward. He supposed it would be rude to ignore the Duke's desire to thank him for helping with the wedding preparations so he decided to go along with it. The two couples stepped back so that Sonic could come forward and greet the Duke. While that was going on, Sora's orb floated down from up above and came towards one of the guards. The orb had been on patrol, hovering above the entire ceremony like a fairy observing the world outside of its own. It had scanned almost everybody and was now checking on the guards to see if they were clean. Once that was done, the orb would shut down, its objective complete.

It scanned one of the guards, its light flashing green as it registered the fact he was clean. It moved on and scanned another guard as Sonic came near the Duke. Tails noticed the orb in the corner of his eye, smiling approvingly. His sister's gadgets were real life-savers and this one would ensure that everything was OK. He turned away and watched as Sonic bowed down to the Duke.

"Your honour." he said, sounding almost amused at having to say those words.

"Your majesty." the Duke replied.

Sonic stood up straight, unknowingly putting himself directly within Akhlut's crosshairs. He grinned wickedly as Sonic's head filled his scope's vision, his finger tightening on the trigger.

"Goodbye you speedy preacher..." he purred.

The Duke looked up at the crowd once more, everybody waiting to see what he had to say. He cleared his throat and then spoke the words that would signal for Akhlut to strike. Sonic stood by patiently, waiting for the Duke to speak.

"This maybe a day of marriage for four special Mobians." The Duke began, "But this is also a special day for..."

He never got the chance to finish for an ear-splitting siren made everybody jump in their seats and look around wildly for what was causing it. Sora knew straight away what was wrong. Her orb had identified an intruder! Sonic and the two wedding couples turned to their left and saw that the orb was facing a guard. A red beam of light leapt out of the orb, identifying the anomaly it had found. It was shining on a guard's wrist, the guard looking nervous and wondering why the alarm was sounding. Sonic knew immediately what that meant and he whizzed over to the guard. The guard didn't even have time to move as Sonic grabbed hold of him and seized his wrist.

Akhlut watched helplessly through the sniper scope. The mission had been compromised! The Royal Fighters had expected an ambush and had set up a security feature of their own! Regardless, he wasn't going to abandon the mission, not when he still had the chance to kill Sonic! He took aim as Sonic pulled up the guard's sleeve, exposing the tell-tale sign that he was an intruder. He was wearing a holographic disguise emitter. And it was ON, meaning the guard was a fake. Sonic grabbed the watch and crushed it with his bare hand, switching off the disguise and exposing the guard's true identity, Ramirez the Chameleon. Everybody gasped in horror as Sonic yanked him off his feet and slammed him down onto the floor angrily.

"Thought you could sneak in here and launch a surprise attack didn't ya S.T.I.N.G. agent?!" the king snarled, "Well sorry ta disappoint but the cops told me one of S.T.I.N.G.'s men wears a holographic disguise emitter so Sora built a contingency to make sure you couldn't use it to get the drop on us...Ramirez the Chameleon!"

The S.T.I.N.G. spy felt like he wanted to punch himself and then impale himself on a stick. Why had he been so stupid and told everybody his name and the gadget he used to spy on people?! Thanks to his own stupidity, he had cost the organization its mission! Tails stormed up to Ramirez and pointed at him sharply.

"What are you doing here?!" he snapped viciously, "Have you come to sabotage our wedding?!"

"Go fuck yourselves!" Ramirez spat angrily.

"Wrong answer..." Sonic sighed, punching the chameleon so hard in the face that he knocked him out, "We'll ask him later. Right now, we've gotta make sure there's nobody else working for S.T.I.N.G. hiding around here..."

Then suddenly, an ear-splitting bang tore through the air as a gun was fired. It had been Akhlut of course. He had decided that it didn't matter if the plan was compromised or not, he could still kill Sonic and hopefully retrieve Ramirez later. He had been slow to act because he didn't want to shoot Tails at the same time. He was meant to kill only Sonic, nobody else. His shot had been aimed at Sonic's head but just as he'd fired, the king had stepped forward so now the gun was aiming at his back. The laser blast soared out of the rifle barrel and hit Sonic squarely in the centre of his back, making him cry out in pain as his skin was scorched and a spurt of blood leapt out from behind him. Everybody gasped in horror, watching as Sonic collapsed onto his knees, trying to hold his pain. Then he keeled over and lay on the floor. Akhlut watched with glee, knowing that he'd at least inflicted heavy damage onto his target. With any luck, the extent of his injuries would kill Sonic later. As soon

as Sonic collapsed, everybody started crying out and gesticulating while Sally and Zoe ran forward, their eyes wide with horror.

"SONIC!" Sally screeched.

"Oh no, dad!" Zoe cried, horrified at what she'd just witnessed.

Tails looked up, wondering where the shot had come from. Cosmo had looked up too and had seen the assassin first. She could just make out the shape of Akhlut up on the hotel and took off the flower on her wristband. It was not in fact a flower, but a throwing weapon with deployable blades that she wielded to great effect. Cosmo threw the bladed flower directly at Akhlut with perfect aim. The weapon scythed through the air as it whooshed towards its target. Akhlut only just had time to realize that somebody had thrown something at him before the bladed flower sliced a large gash into his cheek, drawing blood and making the orca howl in agony. He dropped the rifle and clutched his face, wincing from the stinging pain in his cheek. Cosmo's weapon boomeranged around back to her hand, the Seedrian catching it and pressing down on the centre to fold the blades away. She noticed that the blades were stained with Akhlut's blood, something that would come in handy for later.

"Wow, good shot Cosmo!" Tails gasped, "You actually hit him!"

"It didn't stop him I'm afraid but we can use the blood samples my weapon managed to pick up to track him down later." Cosmo said grimly.

Up on the roof, Akhlut decided that he'd overstayed his welcome and turned on his heels. Forget Ramirez, the stupid chameleon would have to save himself for all he cared. He just wanted to get away before anybody could arrest him. Akhlut took off, running as fast as he can before anybody could think about chasing him. He took out his communications device and bellowed into it.

"LYRA, GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE AND RUN! THE WHOLE MISSION IS COMPROMISED! WE'RE FALLING BACK **NOW!** "

He then put the device away and leapt off the hotel roof and onto another building. He didn't stop running until he was as far away from the scene as possible. Because Akhlut had left, he never saw the moment where everybody circled around the unconscious and badly bleeding Sonic the Hedgehog. He didn't even get to see their tears as they all sobbed for the King of New Mobotropolis.

Out of all the horrified, crying faces in the crowd, nobody cried harder or louder than Sally and Zoe as they cradled the hedgehog's body. Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora all sobbed with them. This was supposed to be their perfect day, their wedding day...and in one loud bang...it looked as if it was ending in the most terrible of tragedies...

Oh no...no...NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! :(

Sonic can't be dead, he just can't! (cries) Oh man...I...I've got nothing...just...just wait for the next chapter! :'(

Double Weddings: Chapter 3

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 3: Investigations

Sonar the Long-Eared Hedgehog was about to receive her most famous patient ever.

But at the time, she couldn't possibly have anticipated such a turnout. For the moment, everything was normal in the New Mobotropolis Hospital. She had spent most of the morning checking in on patients and asking if they required any medicine or pills they needed to take. Later today, she was meant to be giving somebody a check-up to see if they had anything that needed looking at. But for the moment, Sonar hadn't been a part of any major emergencies or anybody needing severe medical attention. Today had been pretty easy-going so far, something she was glad about since today was a very special day. Of course, she'd heard about the double-weddings for the Royal Fighters Service and had been very happy to hear about it. She only wished that she could've attended herself but she couldn't get a day off work yet so Sonar was still on duty while the rest of the world was tuning in to see the big wedding, be it in person or on television.

As of now, Sonar roamed through a corridor, heading towards the hospital cafe. It was her break time and she was ready for a drink. As she entered the cafe, the long-eared hedgehog was quick to notice that she wouldn't be having her drink break alone. There were other doctors and nurses sitting at tables drinking or snacking and chatting to one another. Sonar knew all of them but the one that stood out the most to her was a Mobian panda bear who was sitting at a round table and waving at her.

He was dressed in a long white coat just as Sonar was but he wore nothing else to go with it. He wasn't as bulky and round as most

pandas, looking pretty slim for his species but still possessing some of that trademark panda bulk. He had warm brown eyes and a friendly smile, a sharp contrast to how the world saw pandas. In Chun-Nan, there was a land full of pandas and they were all savage, mindless brutes who devoured anybody who so much as looked at them. But this panda was very different, being sentient and more like actual Mobians. This wasn't odd since Mobius was home to pandas who weren't savage but thanks to the Land of the Pandas in Chun-Nan, a lot of people stereotyped them that way and thus, non-savage pandas had a hard time being accepted in the world. But Sonar had welcomed this panda onto the team with open arms and had struck up a friendship with him.

She noticed with a sweet smile that the panda had two drinks, one for himself and one for her.

"Got you your usual Sonar." the panda said, handing the cup over to the nurse as she sat down at the table.

"You're very sweet Evan, you know that right?" the hedgehog replied.

Sonar always enjoyed a cup of New Mobotropolis's Brand Coffee during her breaks, something that the panda, Evan, had picked up on. It seemed that ever since the two had met, Evan was always the one to have her favourite coffee ready for her, something Sonar greatly appreciated.

"Just being my usual polite self Sonar." Evan said casually, "If I'm gonna stop this stereotyping of all pandas being savage, I need to show that we can be nice too right?"

"And you do a good job on that Evan." Sonar replied, bringing the cup to her lips and lightly breathing in the warm aroma of the coffee, "You're helping to save lives, just as I am, and you're very nice and sociable. With a personality like that, people really will learn that not all pandas are bad."

"Ditto." Evan replied, "So what's next for you then?" he asked curiously, "You part of any operations or..."

Sonar couldn't help but smile at this lovely but inquisitive young man. Evan clearly seemed to like her a lot for he was always curious about what was going on with her and what she was up to. She wasn't sure why Evan seemed to like her in particular but she didn't mind. Sonar liked friendly people and she enjoyed Evan's company very much.

"I'm not really expecting anything serious today." the nurse-hog admitted, "Aside from a few check-ups, there's nothing really that major happening. I'm pretty much in for an easy-going day."

That was when fate decided to announce it had plans of its own for Sonar. The cafe had a radio that was currently playing the news and right now, a news story was being told. But the story had made everybody go quiet as if unable to believe what they were hearing. Sonar had sensitive hearing, a result of her large ears, so she could hear more clearly than everybody else. What she heard made her blood run cold.

"...tragedy appears to have stricken Mobius on this very special day." the news reporter announced, her voice fighting to remain even but failing to keep the shock and horror out of it, "Today was supposed to make history for four Royal Fighters were to be wed at the Soleanna Palace. But instead of marriage, we've gotten assassination for King Sonic the Hedgehog was gunned down by a sniper who was reported to have been spotted on a hotel roof nearby. It is currently unknown on what King Sonic's condition is like but it's rumoured to be critical. Will today end in blood in tears or will his majesty pull through? We hope to get more information very soon..."

Sonar stopped listening. She had heard enough. Today had quite possibly turned in the worst way possible. The double-wedding had ended in disaster and Sonic was presumably dying right now! Why had fate decided to be so cruel to the R.F.S.?! Why couldn't they

have had another great day like the 17 years of peace the world had been allowed to enjoy?! Evan noticed that the nurse had gone very pale and rigid with horror and he got up from his chair to comfort her. As soon as his hands touched her shoulders, Sonar seemed to snap out of her petrified state and looked at him.

"That sounds terrible!" Evan gasped, "Somebody tried to shoot King Sonic!"

"No doubt S.T.I.N.G. did it..." Sonar muttered, "Evan, I have to go to Soleanna and pronto! I might be able to help save Sonic's life given my...abilities." she added, looking a little shy about bringing up her special power, "You have to tell everybody that I'm off to Soleanna and phone the staff of the Soleanna Medical Centre so they know I'm coming! Will you do that for me?"

"Yeah, sure! Anything for you Sonar!" the panda doctor replied, "I'm sure the staff will understand."

With that settled, Sonar quickly sprinted out of the cafe and headed down the halls. She went down the stairs to the bottom floor and ran out through the hospital doors into the outside world. Now outside, she began to sprint faster and faster, picking up speed gradually as she accelerated. Sonar was not quite as speedy as Sonic or Shadow in terms of running but she was a fast runner compared to most Mobians. Her top speed was 300 mph, more than fast enough to get her from New Mobotropolis to Soleanna in record time. As Sonar picked up speed, she prayed with all her might that she wouldn't be too late and that she would be in time to save the King of New Mobotropolis. She did not want today to end in blood and tears, not when it was supposed to be a very happy day for the R.F.S...

Over at the Soleanna Medical Centre, Sonic the Hedgehog had quickly been rushed into a hospital room with no delays whatsoever. It was as if the entire building had gone out of its way to make sure that Sonic's medical treatment was given to him as quickly as possible. The staff had been keen to get him a room and before

anybody had a chance to observe their surroundings, Sonic was now lying in a comfortable bed with a heartbeat monitor attached to him so they could see if he was still alive. Sally, Zoe, Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora were all in the room with him, clearly determined to see the king pull through and be there for him when he woke up.

All the other Royal Fighters had been ordered to take up strategic positions around the hospital and stand guard. S.T.I.N.G. had made its move and Sally wasn't not taking any chances at all. They might send an anonymous guy to come to the hospital to finish the job or to make sure that Sonic was dead. At this terrible stage, nobody could afford to let S.T.I.N.G. get anywhere near the super-speedy hedgehog again. This was now S.T.I.N.G.'s second attempt on Sonic's life and once more, they had gotten very close to finishing him off.

But as of now, nobody was sure if Sonic was going to live. Now that the king was settled into his room, which seemed to be larger than most of the rooms the Soleanna medical centre had as if it was trying to suit the Hero of Mobius's needs, a medical staff could now take a moment to look at him. The Soleanna Medical Centre was said to be one of Mobius's most potent and efficient hospitals with five-star service and a team of medical staff that were said to be world class. The hospital was easily the best place Sonic could be in right now, recovering in five-star comfort. That is, if he pulled through.

As a team of doctors and nurses observed Sonic, Zoe clutched her mother tightly, still crying over what had happened to her father. Sonic may have annoyed her greatly with his over-protectiveness over the years. But Zoe didn't care about that now, he was still her father and she loved him very much, even if they didn't always see eye-to-eye. Right now, she didn't want Sonic to die and couldn't help but pray that he would pull through.

"My daddy can't die, he just can't!" she wailed, "Oh mom, I really hope he's gonna live!"

"Your father's a strong fighter dear, he has survived much, much worse than a shot in the back. I'm sure he'll pull through." Sally said, her voice soft and gentle as he patted her daughter on the back.

"Oh why did S.T.I.N.G. have to ruin the wedding?! WHY?!" Zoe howled, burying her face in her mother's chest.

"Because they're fanatics who deserve to be locked up forever..." the queen replied, shedding some more tears herself.

Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora were sitting nearby, still in their wedding attire. They felt very out of place, the clothes not suited for this kind of atmosphere. How many weddings in the world had ended like this, somebody dying and the bride and groom have to instead hope they pull through instead of enjoying their lives as a married couple? It didn't seem fair that it had to happen to them. All they wanted was to give Mobius hope for peace once again and to put aside all fears of S.T.I.N.G. for a wonderful day of marriage and love. Instead, it looked as if it was ending in death and misery.

Tails looked very tense as if he was trying to keep himself under control. He was shaking furiously and his eyes were welling up but he tried to hold it in. He didn't want to show weakness but instead, he made himself look as if he was a dam about to burst. Cosmo noticed this and began to worry for her fiance. If he kept this up, he'd just end up hurting himself.

"Please Tails, don't do this to yourself. Let it all out." Cosmo said quietly, putting her hand on his thigh.

"Why? What good's crying gonna do?" the fox muttered bitterly, "Unless we all have magic tears or something, Sonic isn't gonna get any better!"

"Tails, please, Cosmo's just trying to help." Sora said calmly. She was trying to keep herself composed for Tails's sake.

"TELLING ME TO LET IT ALL OUT ISN'T DAMN WELL HELPING!" Tails exploded, leaping up out of his seat in rage, "SONIC'S DYING AND YOU THINK SITTING HERE CRYING ABOUT IT'S GONNA SUDDENLY MAKE IT ALL BETTER?!"

Everybody flinched, surprised to hear Tails yell like this. Even the doctors had all gasped and looked up in shock. The twin-tailed fox was usually not easy to rile up and didn't often get in a bad mood. But this time he was more angry then he'd ever been before. He almost looked as if he'd changed into a different person as a result of Akhlut's attack. But after that loud rant, Tails suddenly lost all the anger in him and his attitude changed. His face fell from anger to sadness and her began to sob, his shoulders heaving up and down heavily. It looked as if he had finally given up and decided to let it all out at last. Cosmo got up from her seat and gently embraced the fox, hoping to comfort him. She patted his back softly as Tails wept into her shoulder.

"I-I'm s-sorry C-Cosmo..." he whimpered, "I d-didn't m-mean to shout like th-that...I'm s-s-so sorry!"

"Ssh, ssh, Tails. Don't worry, it's OK. You had every right to shout." Cosmo whispered softly, "We understand your pain. Sonic's your best friend, it's only natural that you'd be upset for him."

"You're not in the wrong at all little brother." Sora insisted, getting up and embracing him too, "We're all sad and angry that S.T.I.N.G. have done this too. You're not alone in this."

"We're there for you Tails and we'll be here for as long as you need us." Ruben promised, "At this dark time, we all need each other right now."

Tails couldn't agree more with Ruben's statement. With his best friend bed bound and possibly on death's door, he needed all the comfort he could get from his other friends and especially his sister and fiancée. He embraced Cosmo and Sora tightly as he wept, seemingly determined not to let go of his girls for a long time. Ruben

stood up and joined in with the hug, wishing to contribute to this tender, comforting moment between the three Mobians.

As the four hugged and cried together, Sally glanced over at the medical team that was working on Sonic. She noticed they were reading his vital signs and observing the ugly gun wound in his back. The shot from Akhlut's rifle had done its damage. There was a black circle marking where Sonic had been hit. The fur had been singed and there was dried blood staining the king's back. It looked deathly serious and Sally could only hope that Sonic wasn't going to die from the hideous injury.

The queen stood from her chair and approached the doctors and nurses, feeling very tense and nervous. There is nothing more nerve-racking then asking the doctors the most intense question you could possibly ask:

"So...how is he?" Sally asked, her voice a hoarse whisper. All the crying had made her throat raw.

The doctors and nurses turned to face Sally, their faces all grave. It is the kind of face that all doctors seem to have when they have bad news to give. A Mobian aardvark with a twirly moustache broke the silence.

"We're sorry to say your majesty but the king's condition is deathly serious." he said solemnly, "His injury is critical and he's lost a bit of blood from the hit. The shot has done a lot of damage to his back and it's quite possible he may succumb to the effects of the injury."

"We're just amazed the blast hasn't killed him already!" one of the nurses, a Mobian wildcat exclaimed, "A shot from a Cosmic Laser Blaster Rifle usually kills in one hit! Sonic may not be dead now but there's a heavy chance his injury will finish the assassin's job for him or her..." she added grimly, looking genuinely hurt to have to say those words.

Sally put her hands to her mouth in horror. This was NOT the news she wanted to hear.

"NO!" she gasped, "No, Sonic can't die! Please tell me there's a chance he'll survive! Please!"

"Dad's gonna live...isn't he?" Zoe whimpered, clutching her mother's hand.

"There is hope for his majesty yet Princess Zoe." the aardvark said, his face blank but his tone of voice happier, "You see, we got a call shortly after Sonic was brought in here. New Mobotropolis's very own Doctor Sonar is coming over here to have a look at him. With any luck, her special power might save him."

Sally and Zoe both felt as if they'd been hit by a wave of relief as they took this in. Sonar was coming to the hospital! That changed the whole outcome for Sonar was a big life-saver thanks to her healing abilities. If it wasn't too late, she might be able to save Sonic! Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora had heard this and they were all relieved too.

"Thank goodness our medical staff sent Sonar our way." Tails said, wiping his eyes, "If anybody can save Sonic now, it's her."

"It depends how serious Sonic's injury is." Sora said grimly, "Sonar's abilities have limits after all. She can only fix so much. If it's too serious then even she can't save Sonic's life..."

"But she's the best hope we have so let's not let go of that." Cosmo said, "If we lose hope then we just let S.T.I.N.G. win."

"And that's the biggest dis-honour that could befall any of us..." Ruben growled.

"You and me both Ruben." Tails muttered, "We didn't lose hope of defeating Eggman or the Dark Armada so we're not gonna lose hope of defeating S.T.I.N.G. Although..." he sighed as he glanced over at

Sonic, "...I hope we don't have to defeat them without Sonic being there to see S.T.I.N.G. fall..."

Everybody else nodded agreeably. Defeating S.T.I.N.G. without Sonic wouldn't feel like much of a victory overall. Rather it feel like little was accomplished and it wouldn't feel fair to be celebrating the return of peace on Mobius without the planet's greatest hero. It would feel like a hollow victory overall. Tails watched as Sonic's heartbeat monitor bleeped softly, registering every individual beat of the dying king's heart. Sonic had to hold on! Help was on its way...

"You incompetent, sea-faring, over-muscled killer whale!" Scorn the Robian Scorpion barked fiercely, "Do you have ANY notions whatsoever of the consequences your blunder has brought upon us?!"

"With all due respect Scorn, it was hardly my fault that the R.F.S. was prepared for the possibility of anybody equipped with a holo-disguise emitter!" Akhlut the Orca retorted angrily, "It's quite clear that those Royal Fighters worked it out and thus, made something that could detect such a gadget and flush out anybody hiding among them!"

"Please daddy, don't be too mad at the ice-sucking beefcake!" Lyra the leech begged, "It wasn't his fault and it wasn't my fault either! It was just bad luck that's all! Funny though, it's not Friday the 13th yet so how can we..."

"SILENCE!" Scorn roared.

Akhlut and Lyra both flinched and stepped back, worried on what would happen to them. Of course, the two members of Scorn's Elite Eleven had to tell them how the mission had gone. Even if they didn't want to tell him, they had no choice but to do so anyway. Scorn demanded to know how S.T.I.N.G.'s operations went and whether it was good or bad news, they had to tell him. Akhlut had decided to be the one to talk for he couldn't trust Lyra to tell the truth or at least,

focus for a minute instead of rambling on like a lunatic. After informing the S.T.I.N.G. boss on Ramirez's discovery and capture, Scorn had reacted just as expected. You could not ever deliver bad news to him and expect him to handle it well.

Scorn glowered at the ocra and leech. It was impossible to tell what he was feeling if you looked at his emotionless face but his body language and voice carried more emotion than his face could ever have displayed even if he didn't just have a visor and mouthplate.

"I ask you to assassinate Sonic and instead, you allow Ramirez to get captured!" the robo-arachnid growled angrily, "Do you have ANY idea on how crippling this could be to our operations? The Royal Fighters will interrogate Ramirez, get him to talk and expose our secrets to the enemy!"

"Don't be silly daddy, heroes don't torture people." Lyra retorted.

"That's a stereotype that we'd be foolish enough to believe Lyra." Scorn snapped, "Do I need to remind you that Sonic, the big hero of Mobius, is the one who murdered Eggman? If the Royal Fighters are OK with murder then torture will be OK in their eyes too. Ramirez's capture could mean the end of S.T.I.N.G. and all because you two decided to run like cowards and leave him in the Royal Fighters's hands!"

Akhlut's face narrowed into an indignant scowl that suggested he had had enough. He puffed himself up, trying to show that Scorn didn't scare him.

"We did not run like cowards at all Scorn!" the killer whale snapped, "We only fled because the mission was compromised. Besides, would you rather all three of us got captured instead? And I don't know why you're so broken up about Ramirez, we're forgetting the fundamental factor here! I managed to shoot Sonic!"

"In the head?"

"In the back."

Scorn let out a sigh that sounded out of place coming out of a robot body.

"I told you Akhlut, you have to hit him in the head with that rifle." he said, sounding annoyed, "I wanted Sonic's death to be instant. You only hit him in the back, which means the Royal Fighters have time to save him, meaning your mission has failed and the R.F.S. get all the benefits from it! Oh and I suppose you were too busy running away to pick up the rifle too?" he added, glaring over Akhlut's shoulder, "I noticed that you appear to have left it behind..."

The sea-faring mammal gasped in horror as he suddenly realized that he had indeed left the rifle behind. It wasn't slung on his back like it should be! He even looked over his shoulder just to see if it was there. It wasn't, it was gone! Lyra tutted at him as if she was a mother mocking her child's mistakes just to be malicious.

"Dude, that is embarrassing." she jeered.

"Do you want me to squash you flat you freak of nature?!" Akhlut snarled viciously.

"Just try it dick-head, I have the powers of freakish nature on my side! You'll never squish meeeeee!" Lyra sang mockingly.

"Stock bickering, both of you!" Scorn bellowed, "This is a serious matter that we have to deal with right now! Ramirez has been captured, Akhlut left the rifle behind and I can't help but notice he has a rather nasty cut on his face." the S.T.I.N.G. boss muttered, pointing at the cut on Akhlut's cheek, "All of this will help the Royal Fighters get ahead of us and given the fact we've left a lot of evidence behind, they can use it to find out who's responsible for Sonic's attempted murder and make an arrest! S.T.I.N.G. could potentially be foiled before Project: Robius can even begin...and all because of you two incompetent imbeciles making too many fatal mistakes that can cripple us!"

Akhlut looked as if he wanted to argue but he decided against it. What good would that do? It would just make Scorn angrier and give him a good reason to kick him out of S.T.I.N.G. He couldn't lose his position, not when he promised his warriors glory ever-lasting and the chance to prove that technology is superior! He relaxed himself and looked away in shame. He had messed up badly and he knew it, as much as he hated having to admit it. Lyra hugged herself, looking as if she was about to cry. Due to her child-like mentality, it did feel like she was a daughter being told off by an angry parent. The criticisms had hurt, especially since it was coming from her father figure. But then...Lyra's rather unstable mind suddenly clicked as she realized something. There was always light at the end of the tunnel and in her case, she had found it!

"Hallelujah, I've just been struck by an idea!" she hollered excitedly.

"Oh god, Lyra's got an idea! I'm out of here!" Akhlut cried worriedly, turning to leave.

"Stay where you are." Scorn snapped, causing the orca to stop in his tracks and remain where he was, "Lyra...do tell what this idea is." the scorpion purred, sounding almost amused at the fact his craziest minion was the one with an idea.

"I've still got the Soleanna Royal Family under my control!" the leech explained, "I can use them to clear away any evidence we left behind and if Sonic's not dead, I can make Elise finish the job for us! The Royal Fighters will let her through of course since she's not one of us and then I'll order my dolly to kill Sonic! And one we find out where Ramirez is being held, I'll make the royals free him too! It's the perfect plan and I'm the genius who came up with it! Eeee, I deserve a medal! Me and my dollies are gonna save the day, hay, hay!"

She skipped around the room excitedly, punching the air as if she'd just found the holy grail. Akhlut looked gobsmacked, unable to believe that Lyra, LYRA(!), had managed to come up with a plan this brilliant that could save their organization from crumbling! He felt

almost as if he'd been slapped in the face by this. Why hadn't HE come up with that?!

Scorn however seemed rather amused by the idea. If he had a mouth right now, he would be smiling with glee at Lyra's genius. It was indeed true that she still had Elise and her parents under control. She had even taken them back to base with her and Scorn saw them, standing vacant as if waiting for orders. Yes...S.T.I.N.G. wasn't finished yet. There was hope for the organization after all. Scorn put his hands on Lyra's shoulders and looked down at her from his great height. The leech looked delighted, this was the first time that Scorn had ever touched her in such a way.

"Lyra...you are more brilliant than I could've anticipated." he purred, "Your "dollies" may well just save our skins at this point..."

Meanwhile, Sonar had finally arrived at the Soleanna Medical Centre. Due to her fast running speed, she had managed to make the entire trip in less than thirty minutes, something she was very happy about for it meant the quicker she arrived, the quicker she could save Sonic. Upon arrival, Sonar had doubled over and panted heavily to get her breath back before she approached the hospital and asked to be let in. Of course, everybody in the R.F.S. knew who she was so they let her in without a moment's hesitation. Sonar was with the R.F.S., not S.T.I.N.G. so she wouldn't be a security risk. As soon as Sonar had been let in, she had been informed of which room Sonic was in and had quickly gone up the stairs to find it. She never took elevators, they took too long in her eyes. In a matter of minutes, Sonar had arrived at King Sonic's room and she walked in, her presence attracting a lot of delighted smiles from the Royal Fighters.

Sally walked up to the nurse and hugged her graciously. Sonar returned the gesture, happy to be there to help.

"Bless you so much Sonar." Sally whispered, "I can't thank you enough on your selflessness. You could've easily stuck to your

duties but you came out here just to help Sonic. How can we ever repay such kindness?"

"No payment is necessary your majesty." Sonar replied brightly, "I'm just a medic who loves to save lives."

"And now you get the chance to save my dad's life!" Zoe piped eagerly, "He's just over there on the bed." she added, pointing.

Sonar approached the comatose hedgehog's bed and gasped. Sonic had been turned over onto his stomach, showing off the bandages around the wound on his back. True, Sonar had seen Sonic for routine check-ups and such other the years but she had never seen the king looking so close to death before, let alone not looking well. She put her hands to her mouth, horrified to see her king's condition.

"Oh my god, it's worse than I thought!" she said hoarsely, "The assassin must have hit him with a powerful weapon! What's his diagnosis so far?" she asked, glancing at the doctors and nurses who had been observing him earlier.

"He's alive, barely." the aardvark replied, "His injury could easily finish him off if nothing can be done about it."

The long-eared hedgehog nodded grimly, observing Sonic's bandaged wound. She could tell just by seeing the blood stains in the centre of the bandages that Sonic was on death's door. He wasn't going to make it unless she could save him with her powers. Sonar clasped her hands together nervously. All eyes were on her now.

"So I guess it really is up to me now." she said more to herself than anybody, "I had a feeling I'd be needed..."

"You may well be Sonic's last hope Sonar." Tails said gravely, "We could've easily gotten a Chaos Emerald to use a Chaos Regeneration to save Sonic but Knuckles has them all and they're too far away. By the time we got one, it might've been too late."

Sonar had wondered if the heroes would've beaten her to the punch and just used a Chaos Emerald to fix Sonic but as Tails had told her the reason why they hadn't used one, she understood. Sonic could've succumbed to his injury long before anybody could've gotten one. He was already dying now, they couldn't afford to waste much more time. Sonar walked around to Sonic's beside and stood beside him. She had her hands together and was about to lean over and touch Sonic's back. Closing her eyes, she tried to keep herself calm. This was the most heart-pounding moment of her life. She was here, in the Soleanna Medical Centre, about to save Sonic's life! She didn't often use her power for she didn't want to make other doctors obsolete and only ever used it in emergencies such as this so Sonic was one of only a handful that would be healed by this power now. But what if she failed? Would she be blamed and hated for failing to save the king? Sonar's hands began to shake. She could feel her heart pounding and her head sweating.

"What if I can't save him?" she worried, "Oh no...I-I-I can't bear s-such a thought! What if I fail?!"

"Please Sonar, don't fret. You can do it, we know you can." Sally insisted, touching Sonar's arms, "We have faith in you."

"But what if I let you all down?" Sonar said nervously.

"It won't be your fault if Sonic dies." the queen noted, "We're still grateful to you for even coming here to try. Please Sonar, give it a try. It'll be better to know that you at least tried."

The nurse-hog said nothing. It was as if she was too nervous to even speak anymore. But she nodded, agreeing with what Sally had said. It was better to try than to not try at all. Breathing in slowly, Sonar held out her hands and closed her eyes. She held them just above Sonic's back. For a moment, she was still and everything was silent. Then something magical began to happen just above Sonic's back. Sonar's hands began to glow a healthy, soothing green colour and a warm, pleasant light began to softly flash underneath them. The light

was small but still very bright, almost bathing the whole room with a soothing green glow.

Zoe watched, completely mesmerized by the process. She had never seen Sonar do this before, nor had she ever seen something so beautiful. Sally had seen it before but still considered it breath-taking just to watch. Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora watched with them, holding their breath. It was as if they were so worried about ruining the process that they didn't dare make even the slightest sound. Sonar was concentrating heavily as her power began to take effect. Sweat trickled down her head and her face seemed to tense up a little.

"I can do it...I must..." she murmured to herself.

That made Sally a little nervous. What if Sonar over-exerted herself just doing this? Was she willing to kill herself just to save Sonic? She watched as Sonar slowly spread out her hands like a magician about to preform a magic trick. The light spread out with them and now it covered all of Sonic's back. The nurse seemed to relax, indicating that the process was beginning to work and she didn't need to tense herself so much now. Then Sonar lightly touched Sonic's back. For a moment, her hands were lightly placed against the king's back, the glow getting brighter and brighter. And then, Sonar took her hands away and the light slowly began to fade.

The room slowly began to return to its normal colour as Sonar's healing power completed its work. The light faded and Sonar's hands slowly began to stop glowing. As soon as she'd finished, her hands flopped down beside her and she opened her eyes again. The nurse suddenly felt very tired and had an overwhelming urge to sit or lie down somewhere. Sally held out her arms just as Sonar began to sag to the side, catching her before she could fall. Sonar let out a long sigh of exhaustion, closing her eyes again.

"You did beautifully Sonar." Sally whispered.

"Did it work?" Zoe asked nervously.

"I...hope...so..." Sonar said tiredly. She sounded like she'd just gotten out of bed.

The Soleanna Medical Staff all looked over at their patient to see what had been done to him. The bandages were still bloodstained but as they removed the bandages to see the wound, they found that to their amazement, the wound had gone! Sonic's back was now fully healed with no sign of injury whatsoever! It was as if the shot had never happened! They also noticed that the king's vital signs were beginning to improve. His heartbeat was now stronger, the beeps quicker than before. The doctors and nurses all smiled with delight and they turned to the exhausted Sonar.

"You did it Doctor Sonar!" the aardvark exclaimed, "You've saved King Sonic! He's going to pull through!"

"YES!" Zoe squealed excitedly, jumping up in the air, "YES, YES, YES, ALL OF MY YEEEEEEEEEEESSSSS! DAD'S GONNA LIVE!"

Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora all punched the air triumphantly as well, relieved to see that Sonic was going to survive. Sally just smiled, her hand over her heart with relief.

"Oh thank goodness..." she said, "Sonar, I can't thank you enough for what you've done. Thank you so much."

Sonar just smiled weakly at the queen. What a day this had been! She had saved Sonic's life! This was quite possibly the best thing that had ever happened to her!

"I...I did it..." she said, trying to inject some enthusiasm into her voice.

"You sit down and have a rest Doctor Sonar. You need it." Sally said kindly, guiding the hedgehog over to a chair nearby.

"Hey guys, why isn't Sonic waking up?" Tails asked suddenly. He hadn't wanted to ruin the mood but he couldn't ignore the question

so he had to ask it.

As Sally sat Sonar down on the chair, she looked a little sullen for she knew somebody would ask that question. Despite the fact Sonic had been healed, he wasn't waking up yet. He was still out cold, peacefully lying on the bed with his eyes closed. It was almost as if Sonic refused to wake up and still wanted a nap. The nurse replied.

"He will...eventually..." she explained, "My...power just...needs...to...fix him...internally. He...has to...remain comatose...for the time...being. I promise...he'll...wake up...very...soon."

"That's good." Sora replied, "But for now, we have to protect him while he's still out of it. He's still very vulnerable."

"That indeed." Tails agreed, "But we can leave things in the Royal Fighters's care for now. Sonic's been healed so now we can carry out the next important thing...investigating who shot him and getting Ramirez to tell us everything we need to know."

"I hope Ramirez is in a talking mood." Cosmo sighed.

"Oh he will be." Ruben declared, "As dishonorable as it is to use such methods, I won't object if we have to...you know, use extreme methods."

"I hope we don't have to come to that." Tails said disapprovingly, "But S.T.I.N.G. is dangerous and we need to use whatever we can to get its secrets so we can stop them for good. I don't approve of torture but I wont' hesitate to use it if we have to."

"Me and Zoe will stay here to help protect Sonic." Sally declared, patting Sonar on the back gently, "You four may go and carry out the investigation. And please, for our sakes...be careful out there."

"We don't want you to end up shot too Uncle Tails!" Zoe piped fearfully.

Tails smiled at Zoe and patted her on the head.

"I promise you kiddo, we'll be fine." he insisted, "We'll investigate everything and come back to deliver the news. And hopefully we'll be able to arrest a S.T.I.N.G. agent too."

With that said, the four Mobians turned and left the room. Sonic was in good hands and steadily recovering, he was safe for now. Now the next part of keeping him safe could commence and Tails was determined to make sure that S.T.I.N.G. didn't get another chance to shoot Sonic...

Later that day, Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora had changed out of their wedding clothes and into their normal attire. They wanted the wedding to continue later on so they felt it'd be best not to wear their nice suits and dresses as they were carrying out important business. Best they stayed in good condition for later.

The four had split up into pairs. Tails and Cosmo were going to study the blood sample Cosmo had managed to get after attacking Akhlut while Sora and Ruben would interrogate Ramirez. The pairs had been about to marry so they wanted to spend as much time together as possible, hence why they'd been split up this way. Tails and Cosmo were now sitting in the Soleanna Science and Medical Research Centre, an ultra modern facility that boasted some of the best technology and gadgetry that Mobius could offer and some of the sleekest furniture and architectural design in the world. Tails had fallen in love with the building over the years, visiting it many times and trying out new inventions to see if they matched up to what was made her. But the twin-tailed fox only needed a scanning tool so they could find out who's blood Cosmo had managed to take with her weapon.

The Seedrian took the flower-shaped object off of her wrist and deployed the blades. They were still stained with Akhlut's blood, which had now dried. She handed it to Tails and Tails set it down on the table. His gloves would make it so that his DNA wouldn't be

mixed up with the DNA on Cosmo's weapon and when Cosmo had thrown it at Akhlut, she had been wearing gloves so her DNA wouldn't show up either. Even now she had been wearing gloves so as not to leave fingerprints on the weapon. She took them off now and held Tails's arm as he picked up the scanning tool he had chosen for the job. The tool was shaped like an over sized shaving tool with an long wide bar at the end and a curved handle. It had a little screen above the bar that would show the results. Tails switched it on and held it above the weapon.

"Now to find out who's behind the assassination attempt. Or at least, narrow down the suspects." Tails murmured.

"I must be one of S.T.I.N.G.'s founding five at least." Cosmo said, "Scorn, Swoop, Razoul, Fang or Breakdown. But now I think about it, Scorn and Breakdown are roboticized so I shouldn't have been able to draw blood from them..."

"And S.T.I.N.G. told Sonic that they have eyes and ears everywhere." the twin-tailed fox noted, "S.T.I.N.G. isn't just the five of them from what they've hinted. This could be somebody we've never heard of."

"Well we'll soon hear about him when we meet him. Or her..." the Seedrian mused.

Tails focused on the scanning tool as he slowly ran it over Cosmo's weapon, not missing a single inch. The sophisticated tool picked up everything it was swept over, especially the dried blood on the blades. It told every detail from how long it had been there to what type the blood was. But as the scan was completed, Tails was most interested in one single fact that the screen displayed for him:

DNA TYPE: ORCA

The fox nodded, grim satisfaction on his face. That DEFINITELY narrowed the field down significantly. Orcas were not a common

species on Mobius so there wouldn't be much to look for when it came to finding the assassin.

"So the killer is an orca." Tails announced, "S.T.I.N.G. really aren't very subtle are they? I'm just amazed this orca guy wasn't spotted before the kill was made! They're not exactly hard to miss."

"He had chosen his position wisely." Cosmo muttered, "He was on the Soleanna Sun Hotel, which is pretty high up so we didn't have much of a chance spotting him beforehand. Even when I hit him, I only really got a brief glimpse of him at best."

"It might've been enough sweetheart." Tails said, a supportive tone to his voice, "So what can you describe Cosmo? What did you see before you hit him?"

"Well um...I think he had some kind of metal fin on his head." Cosmo thought, putting a finger to her lips, "And I believe I could make out something yellow on his torso. Probably his outfit. But that was all I managed to make out at most. I'm very sorry Tails but I can't be of much more help." she added sadly.

"Hey, don't beat yourself up Cosmo!" the fox said, holding Cosmo by the shoulders, "Your description can still help. There can't be many orcas out there with metal fins and yellow outfits! I think you've helped more than you realize."

The plant-based alien couldn't help but smile in response to this.

"Tails, you always seem to know the right things to say to me." she said graciously, putting her arms around her fiance, "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"Be the sweetest and most wonderful woman I've ever met?" Tails replied teasingly, "I think that helps." he winked.

"Yeah, maybe it does handsome." Cosmo giggled, "Just like you're the sweetest and most wonderful man I've ever met."

"I try to be." the fox said casually, "Especially when my friends and you are concerned."

The happy couple beamed at each other for a moment before they kissed passionately. In that brief moment, all their worries and the whole scene of Sonic being shot and the worry about him dying had gone. All that mattered was their undying love for each other. After the kiss, Cosmo decided to bring up another subject as their lips separated.

"Tails?"

"Yes?"

Cosmo paused for a moment, choosing her words carefully before speaking again.

"When all of this is over...after we get married and S.T.I.N.G. is brought down...um...how do you feel about starting a family?" the Seedrian asked, "I'm sorry if this is an inappropriate time to ask but uh..."

"It's OK Cosmo, really." Tails replied, "I haven't though that far ahead yet on what will become of us once we're married. But once the wedding's done, we can plan as much as we like on that. And yeah, maybe we could start a family."

"I'd love that very much dear." Cosmo replied, "I love the idea of being a mother."

"And growing up being Zoe's unofficial uncle's made me rather like the idea of being a dad." the fox replied, "Maybe that'll be our reward when we bring S.T.I.N.G. down for good."

It was a very lovely thought that the Mobian and Seedrian couple liked very much and just thinking about it made them feel at ease and pleasant inside. Now that they didn't have anything else to say, Tails got up from his chair and handed Cosmo her weapon back.

Cosmo put it back on her wrist and followed her fiance out of the lab. They both wondered how Sora and Ruben were doing now as they left...

As for the water panther and vixen, they were still in the Soleanna Medical Centre. In order to keep a close eye on Ramirez the Chameleon, the R.F.S. had decided to keep him locked up in an empty room in the hospital so he wouldn't be able to escape. Bunnie Rabboh had been assigned to keep guard, standing by the door with her trademark weapons, a metallic fist glove and a laser cannon that fitted nicely over her hand, ready for action. The Royal Fighters were confident that Ramirez couldn't escape from this room for they had belted him down to the bed and the room he was in had no windows but they decided it would be wise to have a guard anyway. Bunnie hadn't left her spot upon being assigned there. She wouldn't move unless there was no further need for her.

Sora and Ruben approached the room and greeted Bunnie, pleased to see her devotedly carrying out her task. The former cyborg rabbit had greeted them in return.

"How is he?" Sora had asked.

"Ah only opened the door once ta see if he was awake yet." Bunnie explained, "He is and he's definitely mad now. Ah can still hear his muffled ranting right now."

"I suppose it was wise to gag him after all." Ruben muttered, "Please let us in Bunnie, we wish to question the prisoner."

And here they were now. Bunnie had unlocked the door and let Ruben and Sora inside the room. For security reasons, she had locked it again. It was better that Ruben and Sora couldn't get out as well since it meant keeping Ramirez trapped. Sora and Ruben approached the bed, seeing that Ramirez was indeed mad. There were six strong leather belts holding him down to the bed, two around his wrists, two around his legs and two around his body. He

was completely pinned down, unable to move and to get away. He wasn't going anywhere. As Ruben had noted, they had gagged Ramirez with a square of tape.

Sora came up to the angry chameleon who was thrashing around and trying to break free but due to the belts, he could barely even move so what he did could barely even count as "thrashing around". His head did most of the moving and he let out muffled rants and moans of rage. Sora slapped him just so she could get him to stop flailing although she had already wanted to slap him just for the satisfaction of physically harming the S.T.I.N.G. spy. Ramirez groaned but stopped his mad flailing, his cheek almost glowing red from the slap. Then the vixen tripped the tape off of his mouth, deliberately hurting him. Ramirez didn't cry out. He didn't want to show weakness in front of the R.F.S.

"Comfy?" Sora sneered.

Ramirez didn't respond so she continued.

"I must say asshole, I "love" the Eggman logo tattoo on your head there." the spy taunted, poking Ramirez in the forehead exactly where the tattoo was, "It really does prove you're like the five morons who founded S.T.I.N.G and wrongly believe that Eggman is some sort of hero and we're the bad guys for stopping him. Really suits you. Pity it makes you stand out like a black sheep in a herd of white sheep. No wonder you need to disguise yourself, that tattoo gives you away the moment you even show up! You might as well wear a t-shirt saying "I'm an Eggman supporter, notice me damn it!" you're that obvious!"

"Fuck off you bitch!" Ramirez snarled angrily.

"Can't. We're locked in with you so you're stuck with us dickhead." Sora retorted. She was clearly enjoying herself, having fun mocking the S.T.I.N.G agent they now had prisoner.

"You're gonna answer us some questions Ramirez and if you do not comply, we might have to use...less civil methods." Ruben warned.

"You think those pathetic threats will break me?!" the chameleon retorted, "I'm not scared of you fascists! And I'm not afraid of torture either! Do what you fucking want with me, I won't break! In fact, I'll take my secrets to my grave!"

He then proceeded to feel around his teeth with his tongue for seemingly no reason. But Sora knew why he was doing it and smirked.

"Oh I'm sorry, are you looking for the cyanide pill you had hidden in your teeth?" she crowed, "I do apologize greatly for the fact you no longer have it. I had to remove it for it was a danger to your life and, well, it's not my fault we need you alive. You understand right?"

Ramirez was gobsmacked. How on Mobius did Sora know about his hidden pill?!

"I'm a spy myself by the way, I've tackled people who hid this stuff just to keep their secrets from the enemy. It's habit of me to check people's teeth these days." the vixen replied, as if reading his thoughts.

"Then I'll just have to suicide myself by holding my breath until I suffocate!" Ramirez declared.

He then proceeded to do just that. He held his breath, refusing to even breathe through his nostrils. He would never let go and that would bring an end to his life. But Ruben smacked him on the stomach, forcing him to let it out. They weren't going to let the S.T.I.N.G. spy kill himself like this.

"Nice try you monster but you're not getting away that easily." Ruben snarled, "You're gonna comply or we'll subject you to more pain than you can ever imagine."

"Bullshit, Royal Fighters don't torture anybody!" Ramirez dismissed.

"How do you know that's true? We could well pretend we have a moral code, which you obviously think we don't have since you think it's wrong that we fought against Eggman." Sora purred softly, "Maybe we do torture others and we don't let anybody know about it. Or maybe I'm just bluffing, how do you know? Simple. You don't. Scary isn't it?"

The chameleon hated to admit it, but Sora's threat was beginning to make him nervous. What if the Royal Fighters did use torture after all? And Sora was right, how could he possibly know if they actually did or not? Sora then continued, pressing her knee down against Ramirez's groin for no real reason other than to hurt him. She looked as if she was about to seduce him though what happened next didn't resemble seduction of any kind.

"But do you know what's even scarier?" Sora crooned, her voice uncharacteristically menacing all of a sudden though she kept up her rather unnerving smile to look creepier, "The fact that we Royal Fighters have the resources necessary to make things horrible for you. In fact, all of us can snap our fingers and you can just disappear, gone like a leaf blown away in the breeze. We could make you vanish forever Ramirez and the worst part is, S.T.I.N.G. will never find out. They'll never be able to rescue you. And while you're trapped alone in some desolate place that nobody knows about, slowly losing your mind from isolation and loneliness, you may well eventually crack and tell us what we want to know anyway. So go ahead, be a stubborn ass and keep your secrets. We'll get them anyway by using this mind-crippling method that'll see you a broken, sorry excuse for a Mobian. It's a win-win for the R.F.S. though complying will benefit you as well since you get to keep your sanity. And don't doubt what I say..."

She leaned in closer as if about to kiss the prisoner. She dropped her voice to a menacing whisper as she concluded her speech.

"...I'm a spy remember? Spies are EXPERTS at making people vanish. I can make you disappear Ramirez. Do you want that?"

Ramirez's head rained with sweat. He didn't doubt for a minute that Sora was lying. He knew full well that spies were indeed experts at making the world forget you existed. While he would happily die and take his secrets with him, he did not fancy the idea of being trapped somewhere, alone and forgotten and gradually losing his sanity from his desire to be free again. It was Mobian nature, a basic instinct to be free. The thought disturbed Ramirez so much that he decided to hell with it all. Not even S.T.I.N.G. was worth losing his mind over.

"OK, OK, I'LL TALK, I'LL TALK! JUST DON'T MAKE ME DISAPPEAR FOR GOD'S SAKE, PLEASE!" he howled pathetically.

Smirking triumphantly, Sora took out a voice recording device from her belt and switched it on.

"Good boy Ramirez." she taunted, "Now then, ready for our first question...?"

Looks like things are looking up for the heroes! Sonic's been healed, Tails and Cosmo have discovered what kind of Mobian the killer is and Sora and Ruben have gotten Ramirez to talk!

But is all of this hope and joy for nothing? Lyra's still got Elise and her parents under control and she has a plan that could easily demolish our heroes's efforts! Will it? Or will the heroes win?

Find out next time as the four soon-to-be-weds head off to "Orca Island"...

Double Weddings: Chapter 4

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 4: Orca Island

Queen Sally and Princess Zoe had been sitting by Sonic's side as he lay still in his bed, slowly but steadily recovering thanks to Sonar's magical ability. It still amazed the two royals to witness how Sonar did it, just holding her hands out and fixing even serious problems with just a magical glow. It made Sally want to ask how she got this power but the queen decided not to. She had a feeling that Sonar would find it impolite to ask and that it was too personal to talk about.

The nurse that had saved Sonic's life was still sitting in a chair but she had fallen asleep herself, snoozing peacefully laid back in the chair with her head against the wall. Exhausted from using her healing power to save the king's life earlier, she had decided to take a nap to regain her strength. So in order not to disturb her, Sally and Zoe had kept quiet, speaking in whispers if they needed to talk. But they had mostly just sat by Sonic, the queen occasionally stroking his head more to comfort herself than anything. Zoe held the king's hand as if wondering if she could give her father comfort in his comatose state. He would wake up soon but the two females still felt a little sad for Sonic. He only wanted to see his best friend get married today and it ended with him getting shot! Zoe could feel a boiling anger steadily building up inside her.

Now that the fear of Sonic dying was over, her grief and sadness was being replaced by rage and anger. She wanted to make the man who had shot Sonic pay ever so much for doing the deed. Then Zoe began to think some mixed messages in her brain. Did she want to kill the assassin? True he would deserve it but at the same time, Zoe wondered if killing the assassin would be worth it. What would Sonic think it he heard his beloved daughter had committed murder? Would he hate her, be scared of her and disown her? Maybe, but he

might approve of it. The princess leaned forward and messaged her temples, trying to ease her anger. Sally noticed this and patted her on the back softly.

"You OK sweetheart?" she asked softly.

"I'm not sure mom..." Zoe mumbled, "I just feel a lot of anger right now. Anger for what happened to dad. I know he's better now but it's still horrible that he even got shot in the first place."

Despite the edge in her voice, she managed to keep her volume down so as not to disturb the sleeping Sonar, something Sally appreciated greatly. Even when angered, Zoe still remained considerate of others.

"I understand very much darling." the queen said, "What happened to your father was absolutely monstrous. It shouldn't have happened. We were all supposed to be enjoying today and instead..."

She paused, trying not to let the despair of today's terrible turn of events overwhelm her.

"It just isn't fair for either of us." Sally murmured sadly, "We only wanted to see four of our greatest heroes get married and S.T.I.N.G. turns it into a near-tragedy. Without Sonar, it may well have been a tragedy..."

"I know and it's why I'm so mad!" Zoe hissed, her voice not quite loud but full of fury, "When Uncle Tails, Aunt Cosmo, Aunt Sora and Uncle Ruben find out who's behind all this, I'm gonna kick their ass for trying to kill my dad!"

"Please calm down dear, you don't want to get yourself over stressed." Sally said gently, patting her daughter's shoulders.

"Sorry mom but I can't help it. At the moment I feel like I need some SERIOUS stress relief!" the princess muttered, "And the attempted murderer will be the perfect stress relief for me!"

"I'm sure it will Zoe but do promise me that you won't go too far right?" the chipmunk queen asked, "I understand your rage, don't get me wrong. But we can't stoop to S.T.I.N.G.'s level. We have to be better than them." she gently stroked her daughter's face, "If you meet the assassin, you can't kill him. That isn't justice, it's revenge and revenge can consume you in ways you cannot imagine. Promise me Zoe, you won't ever stoop to that level. Promise?"

The princess was stunned. It was almost like her mother had just read her thoughts! She had been thinking about killing the assassin to pay him back for her dad and now Sally was telling her not to kill anybody! Zoe had to admit it, her mother really did know her very well. Looking down at the floor, Zoe's face fell. She felt guilty. How could she have thought about something so barbaric!

"I'm very sorry mom...but I was actually thinking about going that far..." the princess mumbled, "I'm just so mad at what happened to dad that...I...you know...wanted to..." she sighed, "It was horrible of me to think about that. I'm very sorry...you're not mad at me are you?" she asked nervously.

"Zoe, how could I possibly be mad at you for what you've just done now?" Sally said warmly, "You've opened up and been very honest about your thoughts and feelings. I'm very proud of you for being so mature. You may only be 15 years old Zoe but you're already showing signs of maturity."

"R-really?"

"Of course dear. I'm very proud to have you as my daughter Zoe."

Touched, Zoe hugged her mother with a big smile on her face. Smiling in awe, Sally hugged Zoe back. If Sonic was awake right now, he would be smiling at the sight of his most precious girls hugging each other.

"You're the best mom, you know that right?" Zoe whispered.

"You're too kind Zoe...but thank you very much." Sally whispered back.

The tender scene was then interrupted, thought not unpleasantly, by the quiet arrival of Tails and Cosmo. Sally had pasted a note on the door saying "Sonar sleeping, please come in quietly" so Tails had opened the door slowly and come in quietly so as not to disturb her. The nurse-hog slightly twitched in her sleep but didn't wake up. Sally and Zoe got up to their feet and walked over to the fox and Seedrian.

"How'd it go you two?" Sally whispered.

"It went well." Tails said proudly, "I scanned the blood on Cosmo's Flower Blade and it came up with orca DNA on the scans. Sonic's killer was clearly an orca."

That surprised the queen. Orcas didn't usually come this far away from their icy habitats. It was virtually unheard of for an orca to be anywhere other than icy habitats like Holoska or the Northern or Southern Tundras. Even White Acropolis was likelier to have orca sightings than something like Soleanna. S.T.I.N.G. was definitely reaching far around the world if they had an orca working for them. Only now could the queen get an idea on just how far their connections spread.

"That...is rather surprising actually." Sally said slowly.

"So dad was shot by a killer whale?" Zoe asked.

"Fraid he was." Cosmo murmured, "And hopefully, if Sora and Ruben have gotten Ramirez to talk, we'll know where to find this orca. I was able to glimpse brief details such as a yellow outfit and a metal fin when I hit him so that might make identifying him easier."

"How are Sora and Ruben doing?" Zoe asked.

"We haven't heard from them yet but I'm sure they'll be back soon." Tails said thoughtfully.

Then suddenly, right on cue, the door opened up again, slowly and quietly just as before when Tails and Cosmo entered. Sora and Ruben had finished their task and had come in to deliver the good news. They closed the door behind them and Sora hugged Tails gleefully.

"Oh little brother, you will not believe our luck!" she whispered excitedly.

"Do tell sis, we're dying to hear it." Tails said happily.

"Sora delivered an EPIC crushing speech to Ramirez and made him crack!" Ruben exclaimed, still keeping his voice down but not too much so he could be heard, "Funny, I don't really use that word much but still, Ramirez told us what we needed to know and Sora recorded it all."

"Did that bastard tell you who shot dad?" Zoe asked.

"Zoe, language!" Sally snapped.

"Oh Ramirez told us more than just that my princess." Sora sneered proudly, "Just take a listen to what I recorded."

She took out the recording device she'd used to record what Ramirez had said. Nobody said a word as the conversation played out. They all heard every single word that had been recorded:

"Good boy Ramirez. Now then, ready for our first question?" Sora's voice started the conversation.

"As long as you don't leave me somewhere forgotten forever!" Ramirez replied. Tails noted the fear in his voice with satisfaction. His sister was an expert in making people crack and he was glad that she'd used it on Ramirez.

"Question 1: Who tried to kill Sonic? Was he alone or did he have accomplices? And please don't try to lie to me, you know what will

happen if you do."

"His name is Akhlut the Orca! And he wasn't alone! I'm one of his accomplices and we also had Lyra the Leech with us!"

"Who's Lyra the Leech?"

"A freak of nature."

"That's not what I asked. I asked WHO is Lyra the Leech, not WHAT she is."

A pause as a sigh from Ramirez came out from the device before the recording continued.

"Lyra's an artificially created Mobian leech with a child-like mind. She's nutty as a fruitcake but don't let that fool ya! She's creepy as all fuck!"

"Big deal, I've been dealing with creepy my whole life. Question 2: Are Akhlut and Lyra associated with S.T.I.N.G. like you are?"

"They are indeed."

"And now my third question. Where can we find Akhlut and Lyra?"

"I don't know."

"Fine, then I guess you want to be buried somewhere forever. Ruben, call the authorities. We can arrange a nice isolated cell for..."

"NO! No, no, I'm sorry, I'll talk! Akhlut has his own base in Holoska which he calls Orca Island! It's a big island full of orcas, you can't miss it! As for Lyra, she mostly hangs around Scorn and you already know where he is."

"Thank you very much. Now final question: why does S.T.I.N.G. want Sonic dead, are there more members than just the big five, Akhlut

and Lyra and what is their ultimate goal? To roboticize all Mobians right?"

"Right. And they want Sonic dead so he can't interfere with us as he did to Eggman. As for S.T.I.N.G., there are more members but I don't know all their names and faces. At the most, I can tell you that there is a group called the Elite Eleven. Lyra and Akhlut are part of said Elite."

"And what are the other nine members's names?"

"I don't know. And don't accuse me of lying because I'm not! I really don't know! I don't even know what species each of them area! I only know Akhlut and Lyra are in the Elite Eleven because they told me themselves! I don't know the other nine!"

"You swear that that's the truth?"

"I swear!"

Another pause.

"Thank you. You've been very helpful to us Ramirez. I'll be sure to tell Scorn all about how useful you've been to us when S.T.I.N.G. comes crashing down."

All that was left to hear was Ramirez cursing violently before there was a loud click sound that signified that the conversation was over and the recording had ended. Everybody in the room had been stunned at what they'd heard. S.T.I.N.G. had an elite? An elite ELEVEN no less! That meant there was eleven potentially deadly members of S.T.I.N.G. hiding all over the world and waiting to make their move! S.T.I.N.G. truly was larger than they could've possibly anticipated. But the most important thing was they knew who they were hunting down to arrest for the heinous crime that had been committed earlier. Their next mission was clear: arrest Akhlut the Orca and Lyra the Leech. Maybe their capture could yield more

results, such as the names of the rest of the elite. Tails smiled at Sora.

"Sora...I've told you before you're awesome right?" he said proudly.

"More times than I can count little brother." Sora snickered.

"I'll say it again anyway, you're awesome!" the fox cried, hugging his sister again.

"Ramirez has definitely been very helpful to us." Cosmo agreed, "And we can confirm he is telling the truth on who shot Sonic by the way." she added, "Tails scanned my weapon and the blood samples contain orca DNA. Ramirez is definitely telling the truth with that in mind."

"So we know who we're looking for now." Ruben muttered, "An orca named Akhlut who works for S.T.I.N.G. He shot Sonic so he should pay for his crime. We'll bring honour to the world by arresting his would-be-murderer and his accomplice."

"We already have Ramirez so that's something." Tails noted, "Although I can't help but be troubled by his very brief description of Lyra. I've got a tingling my tails that there's something he wasn't telling you, like he's hiding something still. Plus how can he not know who's in the Elite Eleven? He's a S.T.I.N.G. member so surely he knows!"

That made everybody think for a moment.

"So...you think Ramirez is lying?" Zoe asked curiously.

"Maybe he is, maybe he isn't." Tails murmured, "But it won't matter. We can get the other names and faces out of Akhlut or Lyra. If we fail then we'll question Ramirez again and see if his answer changes. How is the prisoner by the way?" the fox asked curiously.

"Unconscious, again." Sora smirked, holding up a couple of fingers, "I used a pressure point to knock him out again. I've called for Wilson, Mandy and their kids to escort him out of the hospital and take him to the New Mobotropolis Detention Centre. They have Mandy's car so they'll get there and back very quickly."

"That's good." replied Tails, "So Cosmo, Sora, Ruben, you wanna come to Orca Island with me? I dunno about you guys but this Akhlut guy is ready for some much-needed payback!"

He cupped his hand around his fist as if to emphasize his point. He was keen to get out there and make Akhlut pay for trying to kill his best friend. Cosmo put her arm around his arm, indicating she was in on Tails's desire to arrest the S.T.I.N.G. member.

"I'm in if you are my love." she said softly, "I'm with you no matter what."

"As am I." Sora declared, "Wherever my brother goes, I go too! Plus I'd love to interrogate Akhlut and Lyra should we capture them."

"And when my love goes, I go too." Ruben said, putting his hands around Sora's waist, "I could never stay behind while she goes on a potentially deadly mission."

"So it's settled then," Sally said approvingly, "You four will go to Holoska and take down this Akhlut person. If Lyra's with him, take her down too."

"Make that five mom." Zoe put in, walking over to the four Mobians who were going to take the mission, "I'm going with them. For dad."

Tails, Cosmo, Sora and Ruben stared at Zoe in surprise. They hadn't expected her to want to join them, though in hindsight, they probably should have. Sonic was Zoe's father so it'd make sense for the princess to want to avenge him. Sally looked a little sceptical about the idea though.

"Zoe dear, as much as I understand your wanting to go, I'd prefer it if you stayed here." she said, "Your father will be very happy to see you when he wakes up and you can help me look after him while he recovers."

"Please mom, let me go with them." Zoe pleaded, "I can help them defeat this Ah-klutz guy or whatever his name is and get S.T.I.N.G. back for burning our castle down the other month! I only want to help them mom!"

"But Zoe, you got captured last time you fought S.T.I.N.G." Tails noted sternly, "What if you get captured again? I can't afford to fight S.T.I.N.G. and worry about you at the same time."

"I won't get caught!" Zoe snapped, forgetting to keep her voice down, "You four will make sure that doesn't happen and I'm more skilled than I was before! S.T.I.N.G. won't capture me again!"

Because she'd shouted, poor Sonar ended up waking up with a start. She sat up as if expecting an emergency of some kind.

"Wha-what? What's happening?" she asked.

"Oops, sorry Sonar!" Zoe piped apologetically.

"Zoe, you're staying here and that's final." Sally said severely, "I'm not ready to let you tackle S.T.I.N.G. again and I doubt your father will be happy to wake up and hear that his daughter's gone after them again. So please, stop being stubborn and accept what you've been told."

That just made the teen hog growl in annoyance and stamp one of her feet.

"God, you sound just like dad!" she moaned, "I thought he was meant to be the overprotective one, not you!"

"Zoe, that's enough!" Tails snapped, "Stop talking to your mother that way or I'll replace you as mine and Cosmo's ring-bearer when our wedding resumes!"

The princess recoiled, surprised to hear just how angry her uncle sounded. Tails was friendly enough but when he was in this mood, you did not argue back with him. Sighing, Zoe decided that enough was enough and she hugged herself.

"OK. I'll stay." she muttered, "But don't think I'm happy about it."

"Now that's settled, we can get going." Tails said, pleased that things had calmed down at last, "We'll be going immediately your majesty. The sooner we arrest Akhlut, the better."

"Do you know how to get to Orca Island?" Sally asked curiously.

"Not at the moment but we'll find it." Sora declared, "I'm sure it's on a map somewhere, we'll find it."

"Good luck to all four of you." Sally said, hoping that she wasn't jinxing anything by saying those words, "And please, come back safely. We don't want your weddings to turn into funerals..."

"S.T.I.N.G. wants to roboticize us all, not kill us." Ruben noted, "They won't kill us, though we don't wanna end up as robots either. That would definitely ruin our weddings..."

"We'll come back safely Sally, and we'll be there for Sonic when he wakes up." Tails promised, "See you later Sally. Bye Zoe." he added.

"Be sure to kick Akhlut's ass for me!" Zoe cried, punching the air excitedly.

"Will do kiddo."

With nothing else to say, the four Mobians left the room to carry out their mission. Next stop was Orca Island and given their advanced resources, they wouldn't take long to find it...

Meanwhile, the three possessed jaguars approached the Soleanna Medical Centre. It had been a few minutes since Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora had left to find Orca Island and they had watched them go before approaching the hospital. Elise, the Duke and the Duchess had all been given a task to do and given they were under Lyra's control, they had no choice but to obey. Deep inside, their minds screamed at their bodies; "Ignore the witch's command! This is wrong! Fight the control!" but their mental voices couldn't be heard over the sound of Lyra's childish tone and constant giggling that filled their heads. They were puppets and as long as the leech was pulling the strings, they were utterly helpless to do anything.

Their first task had been to retrieve the rifle that Akhlut had dropped earlier. It was the very weapon the orca had used to shoot Sonic and now the Duke was carrying it in his arms. It didn't suit his appearance, looking very out of place in the hands of a royal rather than a soldier. Now the Royals had the rifle, they could use it to finish Sonic off for good. That was their next task and as they approached the medical centre, they heard Lyra mentally communicating with them.

"Now dollies, remember? No leaving the hospital until Sonic is deady-weady!" the voice hissed, "You will walk into the room and shoot him, no questions asked! And then when you're done, you can look for Ramirez and get him back. That grumpy bastard needs saving! Might be wise if you split up and do it. Elise and the Duke can kill Sonic while the Duchess finds Ramirez. Got that dollies?"

"Yes mother. We obey." the trio of jaguars droned.

They pressed on, the hospital seeming to grow in size as they approached. Knuckles, Shade and their daughter Sadie were standing guard by the hospital door. Considering their strength, they were considered the best Royal Fighters to stand guard by the front door. If there was anybody who no intruder would ever get past, it was the echidna family. They seemed to be chatting to one another.

"Do you ever wonder where Sonar got her power from dad?" Sadie asked curiously, "I mean, it sounds like she does a Chaos Regeneration but she hasn't got a Chaos Emerald has she? We have them all."

"We do indeed Sadie." Knuckles said, "I don't think it's Chaos Energy that gives Sonar her power. It might be one of those things we can't explain."

"Some Mobians are born with powers, just like your dad with his super-strength." Shade said, looking down at her teenage girl, "Maybe that's the case with Sonar."

The jaguars knew who Sonar was and that told them something. If they were talking about the miracle nurse then did that mean she was here? If she was then maybe they'd have to make sure that she wouldn't be able to heal Sonic. After all, Sonar could not revive the dead. The Duke approached the echidnas, catching their attention. Knuckles glanced at him and stood his ground. He knew the Duke wasn't a threat but he couldn't lower his guard. Not when it was possible there could be S.T.I.N.G. agents trying to kill Sonic while he was recovering.

"Hey Duke, what brings you here?" he asked.

He then spotted the rifle that he was carrying and raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

"That's a big gun." he muttered, "Where'd you get it?"

"We were looking for the man who shot Sonic." the Duke droned, "We found this and we assume it's the gun the assassin used to shoot him."

"Please can we come through so we can take this to the queen?" Elise asked politely, "Maybe she can get somebody to analyze it and find out who the killer is."

For a moment, it sounded more like the Duke and Elise had spoken with the same voice but nobody registered the fact. Knuckles nodded. He didn't see any harm whatsoever in allowing this. The Royal Family weren't a security risk and they had a logical reason to bring the rifle in. Of course, he had been told by Tails that they were looking for the killer and seemed to know who it was but the gun could carry more clues that Sally could pass onto the four. He stepped aside along with Shade and Sadie.

"Sure, go ahead." Knuckles said, "But whatever you do, make sure the damn safety is on! We don't want any accidents."

"Yes sir." the Duke of Soleanna said.

"Forgive me for asking but are you three OK?" Shade asked curiously, running her eyes over the trio, "You don't sound yourselves and you look a little pale. You don't feel sick or anything do you?"

"We are fine Shade." the Duchess put in, "Please don't fret about us."

The she-echidna wasn't entirely convinced but she shrugged it off. If they were fine then they were fine. She didn't question them again as the Duke, Duchess and Princess walked past them into the hospital. With that done, they resumed their guard duty though Sadie couldn't help but glance back over at the three and wonder if there was something wrong with them after all. They all sounded flat and monotonous and as her mother noticed, they looked ill. It didn't add up but Sadie knew that it was rude to pry on people so she stayed put, waiting for any signs of an intruder for her to soften her knuckles on.

Now that the three were inside the hospital, they carried out the next part of their "mother's" plan. The Duchess separated from the group and wandered off, looking for any signs that might lead her to where Ramirez was being kept. The Duke and Elise stayed together, walking side by side as if they were marching soldiers rather than a father and daughter visiting the hospital. The staff noticed the gun

that the Duke was carrying and were tempted to raise the alarm. But the Ruler of Soleanna stopped them by making an announcement.

"It's OK my subjects, don't fret." he insisted, "I'm bringing this rifle to Queen Sally so she can have it analyzed for any clues as to the identity of the killer."

That made them all relax. If that was the reason they had brought the rifle in then there was nothing to worry about. Elise then pointed over at a nurse who was just putting a stereoscope around her neck.

"You there, do you know where Queen Sally is?" she asked curiously.

"Sure, she's in Room 8643." the nurse replied, "She's there to comfort the king. Poor guy was shot earlier but Nurse Sonar came over to save him."

"Thank you." the princess replied.

She and the Duke carried on, heading towards an elevator. The nurse was briefly puzzled, confused as to why the princess sounded so vacant and why her eyes seemed so lifeless but she knew better than to ask questions. She carried on, leaving Elise to walk into the elevator with her father and close the doors. She pressed a button on the panel for the top floor, the floor that contained Room 8643. The elevator began to ascend, causing the Duke and Elise to feel their stomachs lurching as they were carried up. All hospitals on Mobius had fast moving elevators for it was compulsory for the medical staff to get up and down floors really quickly. It wouldn't take them long to arrive.

Sure enough, there was a ping sound and the elevator doors opened up, showing Elise and the Duke a long corridor that stretched down in two different directions. They looked to their left and a saw a sign that directed them to Rooms 8640-8650. Room 8643 would be down that corridor. The two jaguars walked through the corridor and turned a corner, keeping an eye on the door numbers as they walked past.

8640.

8641.

8642...

There it was. There was Room 8643. Elise knocked on the door. With any luck, there would be nobody inside and they could just kill Sonic already. But unfortunately, they weren't so lucky. They received a response.

"Yes? Who is it?"

It had been the queen who had responded. With no other choice, Elise opened the door and she and her father walked inside. Sally was there with Zoe still and so was Sonar, who now looked more awake than before. The three girls looked surprised to see the Princess and Duke of Soleanna.

"Why hello there." Sally said politely, "What a pleasant surprise this is. What brings you here your honours?"

"And why have you got a big rifle with you?" Zoe asked, pointing at it curiously.

"We found it on a hotel nearby." Elise explained, "We believe it belongs to the killer. We were wondering if you could analyze it and find out who it belongs to."

Sally believed the story. The medical staff that had been looking over Sonic earlier had said he'd been shot by a Cosmic Laser Blaster Rifle and the gun the Duke was holding right now as indeed that kind of model. Zoe looked angry upon realizing what the gun was about. It was as if the very presence of it made her burn with rage.

"So that's the weapon the killer used..." she growled, "Stuff analyzing it, we know who the killer is anyway! Some orca named Akhlut like

Ramirez told us! Give it to me so I can smash it! S.T.I.N.G. will never use it again!"

"Zoe dear, settle down." Sally said gently, "While we very much appreciate the fact you've brought the rifle for us to look at, I'm afraid we don't need it. We've gathered enough evidence to find out who the attempted murderer is. We were even told by our prisoner who did it and where he is so the rifle is irrelevant to us."

"Maybe so, but not to us..." the Duke said coldly.

He had been given new orders by Lyra for the leech had taken all of this in and made up her mind. The rifle distraction obviously wasn't going to work so they may as well get straight to the point. The Duke raised the hi-tech weapon and pointed it at the queen and princess. Sally hesitated, puzzled for a moment.

"W-wait, why are you pointing it at me?" she asked.

"Put the thing down, you'll hurt somebody with that!" Zoe exclaimed frantically.

"You three will get out of here and leave us alone with the king." the Duke ordered, "Do not make me have to shoot you. Do as you're told and we'll spare your lives."

"What the fuck's wrong with you?!" the princess screeched, "What the hell are you doing?! Put the damn gun down!"

"Your majesty? I don't think the duke's himself..." Sonar gulped nervously, "I've dealt with patients who are victims of mind control before I was recruited as a nurse in your city. I think the duke's being controlled by somebody!"

That made so much sense. The Duke never behaved this way before. Sally had to agree with Sonar's theory, it must be mind-control that's making the duke like this.

"Who is it Duke?" Sally asked, "Who's controlling you? What do they want you to do?"

"That is irrelevant. Leave here now or we'll kill you." the Duke threatened, his voice still low but containing a lot of menace.

"You're here to kill dad aren't you?" Zoe growled, "S.T.I.N.G. wants to make sure the job's done no doubt! Come on Duke, come on Elise, you can both fight this control! You don't wanna kill dad!"

The Duke aimed at Zoe and curled his finger on the trigger. The princess flinched, her eyes wide and fearful as she took in what was happening. Sally clutched her tightly, fearing more for her daughter's life than her own.

"No, please, don't shoot!" she begged.

"Then leave now and let us take care of the king and you'll be spared." the Duke ordered, "Do not make me ask you again."

"But we can't just let you kill my husband!" Sally pleaded, "Please, don't do this! You're friends with the king! You'd never want to shoot him!"

"Dad, they're not doing as they're told. Just shoot them already!" Elise snapped impatiently.

The Duke nodded and aimed the rifle at Sally and Zoe. He had been told by Lyra to shout to maim or wound, not kill so he had set the rifle to a lower setting. The shot would cause great pain and maybe knock them out but they would live. Live to see King Sonic get murdered in his own bed. Sally shut her eyes, clutching Zoe tightly to her chest in terror. But no gunshot came. A loud ear-splitting noise shook the room but it wasn't a gunshot sound. It was...a loud scream. It was more than just a scream, it was some kind of powerful attack that seemed to blow the Duke and Princess off their feet and out of the room. The two royals were so startled that they didn't even register the heavy impact of their crash-landing outside.

Sally and Zoe opened their eyes in order to see little circular waves flying over their heads, accompanied by an ear-splitting screech that made their ears hurt. It felt as if somebody was hammering their ear-drums repeatedly. This was an attack that few Mobians could use in the world. It was called a sonic-scream and the attack had come from the last person they had expected it to come from. Sonar!

Standing behind the two, Sonar head thrown her head back, opened her mouth and unleashed the sonic-scream, the attack flying right over Sally and Zoe's heads as it hit the possessed duke and princess. The long-eared hedgehog closed her mouth and panted for a moment before straightening up and helping the queen up onto her feet.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I am thanks to you!" Sally gasped, "That was incredible! I didn't know you could do a sonic-scream!"

"There are many things that a lot of people don't know about me your highness..." the nurse said modestly, "The sonic-scream was something I inherited from my family. It can be tiring to use but it's great in emergencies like this!"

"I'll say, you saved our lives!" Zoe shrieked excitedly, "First you save dad's life, now you save our lives!"

Sonar beamed with pleasure. She was a doctor and saving lives was all she lived for. Saving three lives in one day was something unheard of in her lifetime but she was very proud of herself for such an achievement. But the sonic-scream hadn't put an end to the danger yet. The Duke picked himself up, the rifle now back in his hand and he aimed it at the girls. Elise stood by him as if providing back-up.

"Our mommy demands we kill the king and we won't let you troublesome females stop us." the royal jaguar said grimly.

"And we won't let you kill my husband so like it or not, you have to get through us first..." Sally said coldly, "We're going to save you from whatever mind-control you've been put under your honour and then we'll find out who did this to you."

Striking a combat ready stance, Sally, Zoe and Sonar all prepared for the inevitable battle for Sonic's life as the Duke prepared to fire at them...

The fight was not going unobserved, contrary to what anybody might believe at this point. Lyra the Leech was seeing and hearing everything thanks to a telepathic link she shared with her possessed victims. That was how far her control stretched, it was as if their eyes had become her eyes and their ears had become her ears. She had heard the conversation between the Duke and Sally, namely the part where Sally informed the Duke that four Mobians were on their way to Orca Island. She assumed that was the case since the queen had said "We've gathered enough evidence to find out who the attempted murderer is. We were even told by our prisoner who did it and where he is." so that meant Akhlut was soon to expect company. And frankly...so was she.

Lyra was on Orca Island right now, sitting alone in an icy room that despite how chilly the air was, she didn't seem all that bothered by the cold. Akhlut had been sent back to his home base as a just in case. Scorn liked to have contingencies and had stationed the orca and leech on Orca Island for in case Sonic's friends found out who had shot Sonic and where he lived. Thanks to teleportation technology that the organization had created, they had been able to get to Orca Island very quickly, much quicker than what any Mobian could've managed. The idea was that if any intruders came to Orca Island, Akhlut would be able to capture them and bug them for Project: Robius. It was also Akhlut's idea on redeeming himself for his failure to kill Sonic and his mistake in leaving Ramirez in Royal Fighter hands. If he could bug some Royal Fighters, he would more than make up for his mistake.

To his annoyance, he'd been left with Lyra again, Scorn reckoning that she'd make very useful back-up and could potentially mind-control anybody into allowing themselves to be bugged. Akhlut wasn't happy but he decided not to argue. Scorn was angry enough with him already, he didn't need to give his boss an excuse to throw him out of the elite.

The two had been waiting around for a while as Lyra put her plan into action. The killer whale had done his best to ignore the crazy leech as she rambled to herself a good few times but something Lyra yelled made him suddenly pay attention.

"Gah, we were too late my dollies! They've already figured out Free Willy's the killer!" she ranted, "Well never mind, we can still get Ramirez! Duchess, keep searching for him! Duke, Princess, don't you dare fail to kill Sonic or you'll be going to bed with no supper!"

Akhlut began to feel a little uneasy. Lyra was indicating that the Royal Fighters knew he was the attacker. Did they know anything else? He came closer to the leech as she leapt up and down like a mad woman.

"Don't just stand there pointing the rifle at the three bitches! SHOOT YOU IDIOT!" Lyra screamed, "But remember, shoot to stun! Daddy doesn't want them dead! And neither do I, the queen, princess and that nurse-hog will make cute dollies for me!"

"Lyra, if you don't mind me asking, what did you mean by "they've already figured out I'm the killer"?" Akhlut asked, poking Lyra in the back.

The artificially created Mobian turned around to face her large companion.

"The Duke told Sally about the rifle and she said they don't need to analyze it because they know who the assassin is and where he is." Lyra explained, "I bet they got Ramirez to crack after all."

"So much for your plan..." Akhlut sneered, happy to get the chance to put Lyra down for a change.

"DON'T YOU MOCK ME LIKE THAT YOU SALTY SUCKER!" the leech exploded, "My plan will still work! We can still save Ramirez and kill Sonic! My plan's not a bust yet!"

"Whatever, that's irrelevant now." the orca muttered, "The Royal Fighters know where I am. They probably got Ramirez to mention Orca Island...looks like Scorn was wise to set me up as a contingency plan after all."

"Daddy's very wise! Brainiac daddy!" Lyra agreed, "Now we'll be able to bug anyone who comes our way and set them up for roboticization later!"

"I can imagine how much fun it'll be for me to have some Royal Fighter Robians as part of my army." Akhlut crowed, "Given how much they hated Eggman, this fate will be very karmic for them! The biggest humiliation and punishment to them for daring to disagree with the magnificent scientist!"

He laughed enthusiastically, gleeful about what would become anybody who dared to come to his island. The declaration made Lyra stare at Akhlut thoughtfully. She hadn't had time to learn everybody in the Elite Eleven by anything other than their name so far so she didn't know why her sea-faring mammalian accomplice had joined S.T.I.N.G. It seemed Akhlut had given a hint or two and she couldn't resist probing.

"Say meat-head, do you worship Eggman too?" she asked curiously.

Akhlut sighed and rolled his eyes as if the question was so stupid it wasn't worth answering.

"If I didn't, I wouldn't have joined S.T.I.N.G now would I?" he snorted, "Yes, I worship Eggman just like the Big Five do. Why? Because Eggman introduced the technology that...saved my life."

The bloodsucking Mobian was puzzled. Saved his life? Did that mean...?

Akhlut was quick to answer her question. He proceeded to take off his shirt and armour plating, revealing a huge muscular chest and torso underneath. There was a scar on the heart-side of his chest that looked as if it had been carved there with a dagger. It was ugly and white, a hideous stain of dead skin on what was otherwise a perfect body. Lyra gasped in amazement.

"Oh my god, look at that scar!" she shrieked, putting her hands to her face in disbelief, "What happened?!"

"I had a fight. It didn't end well." Akhlut muttered, "I was left dying, staining the snow red with my own blood. It was as if my own heart was crying over my defeat. If S.T.I.N.G. hadn't found me, I may well have been dead. And how did they save me? By using the very technology that those idiot Royal Fighters dared to say is "evil". How is it evil, I mean look at me! They roboticized the damaged area of my chest and repaired my heart with Eggman's technology! I'm alive because of that technology and they dare to think Eggman's the bad guy for introducing it to Mobius?! I owe Eggman much for this since, in a way, he saved my life! And now I get to continue leading my soldiers towards conquest and glory!" he added, a heavy tone of pride backing his words.

"Wow...and here I thought you was just in it for the power!" Lyra gasped, "You're in it because you owe the dead man big time pretty much!"

"Yes...pretty much." the Arctic-faring whale nodded, his voice surprisingly pleasant and gentle to Lyra this time, "I owe Eggman much for my life being saved and it's an honour to be part of S.T.I.N.G. so that I may serve my saviour's legacy. I hope he's very proud of me wherever he is..." he murmured, smiling pleasantly to himself.

"Well we've got the chance to make him VERY proud now!" Lyra piped excitedly, "Some Royal Fighters are coming to your base so we'll get the chance to roboticize them once we bug them ready for Project: Robius!"

"Indeed so..." Akhlut purred softly, putting his shirt and armour back on, "Oh yes, my chance for glory will come. Keep observing what your "dollies" are doing. I'm going to prepare the welcoming committee."

The orca strode off, leaving Lyra to continue watching what her possessed minions were doing. The huge Mobian could barely contain his excitement. Royal Fighters would be coming his way! He'd get a chance to redeem himself and prove to S.T.I.N.G. he was useful! What glory would befall him when he got to bug his first victim...

Meanwhile, Tails, Cosmo, Sora and Ruben were on their way to Orca Island. The four of them were travelling in quite possibly one of the fastest modes of transport on Mobius, a supersonic plane. But this plane wasn't any ordinary plane. The aviation machine had been invented by Tails himself when he had first become a teenager.

The jet was huge with a futuristic design and a predominantly white colour scheme with black and gold in places and even red. There were two cockpits, one mounted near the plane's yellow tipped nose cone as per tradition and the second was mounted more in the centre of the vehicle. The jet had enough room for two people in each cockpit, meaning it could carry four Mobians overall. Four was all it needed to carry for this mission. The jet also sprouted four wings that formed a distinctive X shape when in flight and carried two fins near the rear end. The rear of the plane wasn't one solid piece like what most would expect. It was instead a folding pair of legs that could deploy for walking purposes and acted as the jet's engines when in flight.

This amazing vehicle was considered one of Tails's magnum opuses in terms of his inventions and Tails was very proud of it. He even gave his plane a name, dubbing it the "X-Tornado" as a homage to his old plane the Tornado and making use of the distinctive X-wing structures he had built on the plane. The X-Tornado was one of the fastest planes currently operating and Sonic had often had fun races with Tails to see if he could outrun the vehicle. The X-Tornado had emerged victorious every time.

Now it was speeding through the air, steams of mist sweeping over the wings and forming white trails in the sky. Tails rather enjoyed the sound of the plane's engines whenever he flew it. The sound wasn't exactly loud but it was quite exhilarating and seemed to add to the X-Tornado's flight whenever it was in action. He steered the jet to the left slightly, turning the joysticks, and he spoke into an earpiece he was wearing so he could communicate with Sora and Ruben, who were in the second cockpit.

"You OK guys?" he asked. He couldn't help it but there was something about him that made him check in constantly on his friends to see if they're OK.

"We're good Tails, thanks for asking." Ruben replied.

"How close are we to Orca Island?" Tails asked.

"According to the coordinates Nicole uploaded for us, we should be there in about five minutes or so." Sora answered, "Can't say I'm that surprised it's in Holoska, orcas are common around that area. Remember to land safely Tails, we have no idea what we're up against."

"I know. Orca Island is new to us so for all we know, it could be booby-trapped or something and we'd be dead before we got anywhere near." the gadgeteer murmured, "Might've been helpful if you got Ramirez to tell you about the island before we left."

"I doubt he would've known anyway little brother." the vixen shrugged, "He doesn't even know who the other nine members of the Elite Eleven are so I doubt he knows what Akhlut's crib is like."

"That still bothers me though, the fact Ramirez rather conveniently doesn't know the other members of S.T.I.N.G.'s elite." Cosmo put in, "I agree with Zoe in how it doesn't make sense. He must be hiding as much information as he told you two."

"Well he's on his way to the MDC so we can always question him again later." Sora reasoned, "And this time, I'll make sure there isn't a bit of information he doesn't tell me."

"So does anybody have a plan for what to do when we land?" Ruben asked.

"I'm working on it." Tails put in, "If the island has defence systems, I'll go in alone to shut them off. One Mobian is harder to track and point out than four. I'll then give you the signal that it's safe to approach and you three can come in to join me."

"That sounds very risky Tails..." Cosmo said worriedly, "What if you get caught? You'll be overwhelmed if you go in alone."

"Cosmo, I'm armed and dangerous and you know it." the fox replied confidently, "I've got enough weapons on me to take out an army, and that's just in my arm gauntlets! Don't worry, I'll be safe when I make the infiltration."

The Seedrian sighed. She loved Tails dearly but sometimes he seemed to take a little too much pride in his gadgets. It had come with age, a sense of pride and confidence in himself and his inventions that seemed to make him feel almost unbeatable. She hoped that this wouldn't get him killed in the end.

"OK, but don't think I won't be worrying about you while I wait." Cosmo said grimly, "I could've lost you forever when Finitevus got you 17 years ago..."

Tails cringed as the dark memories of Mecha Tails and the Dark Armada came flooding back to him. He and Cosmo had very easily come close to losing each other back then. He didn't need reminding that it was still possible they could lose each other now.

"I understand Cosmo." Tails replied, "I know you worry about me. But you don't need to. We're never gonna lose each other again, you know that right?"

Sitting behind him, Cosmo nodded as the fox turned around to look at her. Tails smiled in return and turned back to see what was ahead.

"Hey Tails, we should be arriving at Orca Island right about now." Sora suddenly chipped in, her voice loud and clear over her brother's earpiece.

"I think you might be right. My radar's picking up something below. Must be the island." Tails responded, "Hold on everybody, I'm going to pull down for a closer look."

He lowered the joysticks, steering the X-Tornado down to the ground. As the plane dipped down below the clouds, they could see that indeed, there was something down below. They had reached Holoska and been flying over the icy country for a good few minutes and now they had found what was quite possibly Orca Island. Despite being called "Orca Island", it wasn't the most traditional image of an island. It was instead a huge base sitting on an enormous chunk of ice as if somebody had picked up a building and just dropped it in the middle of Holoska. The island was surrounded by a huge ring of water that had a thin stream leading back to the ocean. From above, it looked more like somebody had carved a circle of ice out from around the base. From up in the sky, it didn't look very wide but Tails knew that when they landed, the water ring would be a lot wider and take much further to swim than he'd think.

He didn't dare land on the island itself lest he be prepared to face a possibly airstrike that could kill them all. Instead, he steered the plane down towards the icy land away from the island. He could

easily fly over the water and onto the island itself with his tails. As the X-Tornado neared the ground, the plane's folding legs deployed and the vehicle slowly began to descend to the ground, the jet flames blazing out from the plane's "feet". The X-Tornado now looked as if somebody had taken half a plane and half a mech and welded them together. The X-Tornado landed on the ground, softly so as not to break the ice. The jet engines fell silent as the cockpit windows opened up and the four Mobians climbed out. The cold Holoska air hit them like a wave. They had been warm in the cockpits but now they were out of the warmth and into the cold. Tails, Ruben and Sora's fur would provide adequate protection but Cosmo didn't have any herself so she had chosen to bring a thick winter coat to keep her warm. She put it on now as the chilly air bit at her.

"Well, looks like this is it." Tails said, peering out at the island from where he stood, "Orca Island, the home of Akhlut. He tried to kill Sonic, now we can come knocking on his front door..."

Well things are getting a little intense. Lyra's got the Soleanna Royals to try and finish off Sonic and Akhlut knows he's going to have company so no doubt he's got some kind of trap set up for Team Prower!

What will happen next? Will Tails and his team arrest Akhlut? Will Sonic be saved? Find out next time as these two events start picking up...

Double Weddings: Chapter 5

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 5: Captured

Now Team Prower was down on the ground and out of the X-Tornado, they could get a proper look at the island base they were now gazing at. Surrounded by a ring of water, the huge base stood proudly on a large chunk of ice, effectively giving it the "island" part of its name.

The building was huge with futuristic architecture, something VERY out of place in a country like Holoska which was more vintage in its architectural designs. This more than advertised the fact that this building belonged to a member of S.T.I.N.G. Only somebody who worked for an organization that prided itself on technology, namely Eggman technology, would own an establishment like this. The appearance of the building made it look as if it was made of various tall buildings smashed together to make one with various points fighting to reach the top of the base. To add to the fact it was called "Orca Island", the architecture made the base look vaguely as if it was made of ice though the four heroes knew full well that it was metal and other hard materials. Nobody in the world would be stupid enough to make something out of ice.

Tails ran his eyes over the S.T.I.N.G. base, the cold Holoska air brushing over his fur.

"So this is Orca Island." he muttered, "How subtle can S.T.I.N.G. get. They may as well have put a big neon lit sign saying "This is a S.T.I.N.G. base, please notice!". If Akhlut thought we'd never find him with a base this obvious, he's clearly not as clever as he thinks he is."

"So what do we know about Orca Island so far?" Cosmo asked, looking over at Sora as she pulled her coat up close to her chin.

"Not a whole lot I'm afraid..." Sora murmured, "Nicole couldn't find much information before we set off. All she could find was its location. The island's history is a mystery with only vague facts of it existing. All we know is that it's a popular habitat for Orcas, hence the name, and Akhlut lives there. How the island was formed and whether that base has always been there or not, I don't know."

"I suppose Akhlut can tell us the history of his little hiding place." Ruben mused, "But we're not here to play historians. When shall we make our move?"

"In a moment, I just need to make sure of something." Tails declared.

The four Mobians had settled down near a mound of snow that would keep them hidden from any possible guards the island surely contained. So as Tails leaned over, Sora, Cosmo and Ruben kept down low so they wouldn't be seen.

The fox pulled his goggles down over his eyes and pressed down on the sides of them. His goggles were hi-tech and contained a lot of sophisticated scanning equipment from heat sensors to night vision. They even had X-ray vision too so he could see through solid objects. As he swept his eyes over the base and surrounding water, he picked up a few telltale signs that getting in wasn't as easy he'd hoped it would be. The water around the island was full of mines, making swimming to the island an act of suicide. It was too cold to swim in the water anyway so Tails hadn't even planned on that. Stepping into water in Holoska was guaranteed to freeze you to death. The island itself had a mine-field just in front of the base entrance. The mines were on and Tails could tell by the increased heat signatures they were emitting. If they were off, his scans wouldn't have picked them up. He could also make out infrared laser beams that seemed to move back and forth on turrets around the perimeter. Some were on the ground and some where on the

building itself. Tails guessed that the beams would set off an alarm if anybody who wasn't on Akhlut's side tried to break in.

He also spotted several guards on patrol, all of them huge, muscular Orcas carrying huge rifles in their hands. They looked well-trained and well-disciplined, the kind you'd expect to see in an army of some sorts. They were clearly soldiers of some kind and Tails knew he'd be finished if one of them got him. Using the X-ray vision, he could see a vague outline of what was inside the base but because he wasn't close enough, he couldn't make out much. He'd get a better view when he got closer and see if the base had any traps inside. Now he had a plan mapped out in his brainy head, Tails switched off the goggles for the moment.

"OK, the water is mined, there's a mine-field leading to the base, there's laser beams sweeping over the area and a hell of a lot of guards." the gadgeteer explained, "Looks like my idea to go in alone and shut off the traps was the right one. All four of us would be dead if we tried to go in together."

"You're the only one who can fly so you'll bypass the traps easily." Ruben noted, "We'd just be a dead-weight since you can't carry us all at once and we'd make you a bigger target."

"So as much as I hate to say it, we'll have to stay here until my fiancé shuts off the traps." Cosmo said glumly, "I wish we could go in with him..."

"And we will once it's safe to get in." Sora noted, "Tails, please be careful when you get inside won't you?" the vixen added, a tone of concern in her voice.

Tails knew that tone all too well. It's the kind of voice a loved one has when they fear the possibility of losing you again. They had been apart for eight years of Tails's life, Sora didn't want to lose him again. The fox smiled tenderly at his sister.

"Don't worry sis, I'll be careful." he promised, "My goggles will pick up any trap Akhlut has lying in wait for me so I won't get caught. I'll give you the signal once you three can get in. Got it?"

"Got it." the trio replied.

"I'll see you later then." Tails said, pulling his goggles back down over his eyes.

He then twisted his namesakes around and around in a propeller fashion. In this one swift move, he had transformed himself into a furry helicopter as he took to the skies. It always amazed Tails on how he was able to do that. Just by spinning his tails he was able to fly just like the birds and the bees that enjoyed the skies. He was forever grateful that he could achieve this feat, knowing just how useful the ability to fly could be to he and his friends.

Tails flew straight up, going as deliberately high as possible so he wouldn't be spotted so easily. He had switched his goggles on again so as he looked down, he could still see where all the traps were. None of the infrared lasers pointed up at the sky. It was clear that Akhlut had built this base with the intention of keeping land-dwellers out rather than fliers. He was more expecting an attack from the ground rather than the air. Tails smiled. That was a security breach he could exploit! He was now so high above the base that the snowy mist would make him impossible to spot. His goggles protected him from the mist so he could still see properly. He flew straight down towards the very roof of the base. He could make out one guard thanks to his goggles's heat sensors picking up his body heat. It helped how orcas, like all mammalian Mobians, were warm blooded. If they were cold blooded, they might not have been easy to pick up.

Tails came in silently, making sure he didn't descend to quickly and he landed a good distance away from the guard so he wouldn't be heard. He touched down on the roof, keeping an eye on the guard as he made his next move. He looked down at the roof, seeing right through it due to the X-ray vision feature. He could make out a room and a flight of stairs down below. There was a door set in the roof

that allowed guards to come up onto the roof or down back inside again. Tails approached the door on all fours so he would be quieter and he gripped the handle. He swallowed hard, hoping the door wouldn't make a noise if he opened it. He pulled it up quietly, the door not making much sound. The wind was blowing quite fiercely so the guard would have a harder time hearing him anyway. Tails opened the door, not all the way but enough so he could sneak in. He slipped through the door and onto the steps that led down from it, slowly closing it behind him. The guard heard the light sound of the door closing and looked around, wondering what the noise was. He shrugged, dismissing it as the wind and marched over to another section of the roof to keep guard.

Tails was now inside Akhlut's lair. He was in a room that had nothing but a flight of stairs leading down further into the base. That made Tails wonder for a moment. Where would he find the control room for Akhlut's traps? There had to be one since it'd make no sense to booby-trap your lair and NOT have a way of turning them off. It would be embarrassing to be blown up by your own minefield. Tails still had his goggles switched on so he could see through all the floors and the walls. Maybe he'd find something that looked like a control room as he roamed through the base. Stealing himself, Tails opened the door and began running down the stairs. He lifted his goggles up so he could get a better idea on what the interior looked like without the different visions in his eyesight. He noticed that the floors seemed to be labelled. He was on the top floor and was gradually making his way down.

Anybody living in this base would know where to go and what rooms to find with ease thanks to these labels. The fox found himself thanking Akhlut for making his base so easy to navigate. With the labels on the different floors, he'd know how high or low he was and whether there were any corridors he could take. He also noticed some floors had labels advertising what rooms were on them. He came by a floor labelled "Dining Hall" and "Exercise Hall" as he darted down more stairs. Tails couldn't imagine any of Akhlut's soldiers being on lunch break yet. He ran down more stairs and

came across a label saying "Control Room". That made the fox grin to himself. Maybe this was just the floor he needed.

He opened the door and found himself in a corridor that was surprisingly unguarded. Or so he thought. As he began to walk down it, he heard footsteps coming from up ahead and darted back. He hid behind the door that let him into the corridor and put his goggles back down. He could see through the solid, steel door that there were two orcas coming down the corridor chatting to one another. He couldn't hear what they were saying but he didn't care, he just cared about if he could see them. He watched as the two orcas turned to their left and walked down another corridor. They weren't intending to leave this floor so they hadn't come to the door. Tails sighed, ignoring the pounding of his heart as he let himself in again and sprinted down the corridor. Thanks to his X-ray vision, he could see through the wall ahead. He could make out the outlines of a room but there was no door in this wall. Maybe the room was on the other side.

Tails followed the wall until it came to a corner and he followed that around too. He was safe for the moment but he knew he couldn't lower his guard and start rushing into it, there was still the chance he could run into a guard. He still kept his senses alert and tread carefully. He came to another corner and peered around it, not sure what to expect. He saw that there was a door with two orcas standing guard on either side. Of course Akhlut wouldn't leave the control room unguarded, that would be the most unforgivable lapse of circuitry ever. Tails observed the guards. They looked bored as if they had been standing here without a rest for hours and hours. From the looks of their faces, it might even have been *days* to them. That was helpful, bored guards were easily distracted. Tails smirked as he opened up a compartment on his arm gauntlet. His gauntlets were full to the brim with gadgets and weapons he had invented himself. One of which was a compartment that held steel marbles for distraction purposes. If necessary, they could shatter and knock people out with a sleeping gas he had stored in them.

Tails tossed the marble into the air and watched as it hit the floor just in front of the orcas. The guards flinched, wondering what had made that noise. One of them saw the marble rolling across the floor and wandered off after it.

"I'll see what that thing is, you go ahead and see if you can find who threw it." the guard following the marble said.

The other guard nodded and walked towards where Tails was. The fox didn't run away for he had wanted one of the guard to come his way. As soon as the guard turned a corner, Tails aimed his fist and fired another marble from the open compartment. The silver ball hit the orca square between the eyes and unleashed its sleeping gas, knocking him out in seconds. He collapsed onto the floor, alerting the first guard just as he picked up the marble Tails had thrown. Before he could do anything, the marble shattered in his hand and knocked him out with its sleeping gas too. He was down on the floor and unconscious before he even realized what had happened. Tails punched the air triumphantly, pleased to see that his gadgets were working. He hadn't gotten to use them much given Mobius's many years of peace so it made him happy to see that now he was in a situation to use them, they worked. Tails ran over to the door and was about to enter until he noticed something. The door had a keypad and required a code to open it from the outside. Tails didn't know the code but he knew how to find out. He lowered his goggles and activated another scanner he'd built into them.

This scanner was used to pick up fingerprints and Tails saw that the keypad had fingerprints over the numbers 5, 2 and 9. The scans picked up that the fingerprint on the five was bigger than the ones on the 2 and 9, suggesting that the code had two fives in it. Swallowing nervously, Tails pressed the keys in the order of 5, 2, 9 and 5 again, hoping that was the right order. Last thing he needed was an alarm to sound because he typed the code in wrong. To his relief, he got the right order. The door opened and Tails let himself inside. He saw that there was an orca sitting in a seat and observing a bank of machinery that showed security footage of what was going on all

around the inside and out of the base. That made Tails flinch in worry. Had he been spotted by a security camera without knowing? No, that was impossible. The alarm would have been raised if he'd been spotted. He hadn't been noticed. The orca didn't seem to realize that somebody had arrived into the control room. He was still staring at the screens and making sure the whole area was secure. Tails took a marble out of his gauntlet and crept towards the orca. He then reached over the back of the seat and dropped the marble on the sea-faring mammal's lap, making him look down curiously.

"Huh, what?" he mumbled half-sleepily.

He saw the marble and wondered where it had come from. He didn't get the answer for it exploded in his lap and sleeping gas engulfed him, knocking him out instantly. He only managed to cough once as he fell unconscious. Tails waited until the gas had cleared before he moved the orca out from his chair and helped himself to the control panel. He saw several buttons and levers and wondered which ones he had to press and pull to switch off the traps. Surely the buttons were labelled for ease of use? He saw a selection of buttons that were indeed labelled. Some of them were labelled with the word "mines" and had a couple of lights underneath the button, red for off and green for on. They were flashing green for the moment. Tails pressed the buttons and watched as the light turned from green to red, signalling that the mine field in the water and on land was now off. He also saw a button that said "lasers" and that button too had the same on and off light feature. He pressed the button and watched with satisfaction as the light changed from green to red. The infrared lasers wouldn't be sweeping over anything anymore. The traps were set off! Cosmo, Sora and Ruben could deal with the guards easily enough so he could now make the call to tell them that they could come in. He pressed something on his left arm gauntlet, causing a piece of it to open up and he spoke into it. It was a built-in communicator and all he had to do when it was opened up was speak into it. It was almost as if he had a phone built into his arm.

"Hey guys, it's Tails! The traps are disabled!" he whispered eagerly, "You're good to go!"

"That's great honey." Cosmo replied, "We'll be with you shortly."

"I'm in the control room right now but I'll make my way down to the ground floor so I can meet up with you." Tails said, "Then we can arrest Akhlut and maybe Lyra too if she's here. See you then."

He switched off the communicator and was about to get out of the seat until suddenly, a huge hand seized him from above and yanked him out of the chair as if he weighed nothing. Tails screamed as he hoisted up and thrown across the room like a rag-doll. He hit the wall with a sickening crunch and collapsed onto the floor. His eyes closed and he lay still. He had been knocked completely out by the blow, not even knowing what it was he'd crashed into. And thus he didn't see the assailant walk up to him, a gloating smirk on his face as he observed the unconscious fox. Akhlut had seen Tails shut off the traps and had made his move. He'd been hiding in the shadows, completely invisible thanks to his black and white skin and had deliberately waited for Tails to shut off his traps so his friends could get in. Now he had the fox in his clutches and was free to do whatever he wanted with him. Grinning like a shark, Akhlut took out a robot cockroach from a pouch in the side of his jacket and he placed it down on Tails's belly.

"One down, three to go..." he purred, watching as the cockroach crawled across Tails's belly and onto his chest.

The tiny machine crawled up to Tails's mouth, the unconscious Mobian not feeling anything as the machine's tiny legs poked at his lips. It forced his mouth open and then crawled inside, almost looking as if Tails was eating it alive. Mercifully, the fox didn't feel the terrible moment the robot cockroach slithered into his mouth and down his throat, invading his body just like the bug that had been placed in Zoe the other month. Now Tails was bugged, Akhlut picked the fox up and draped him onto his shoulder.

"Now to use you for a little bait to make your sister, friend and fiancée give themselves up..." the killer whale purred, leaving the room with Tails in tow...

Meanwhile at the Soleanna Medical Center, Sally blocked a heavy punch that was thrown at her face by the Duke of Soleanna. The queen was surprised at how hard the punch was, her arm shuddering as the Duke hit it. She hadn't expected the Duke of Soleanna to actually be able to fight. But that hadn't stopped her from disarming him by knocking the rifle out of his hands. It now lay on the floor, ignored as the Duke tried to punch the queen.

The fight in the hospital was beginning to get hectic with Sally, Zoe and Sonar all fighting together to protect the still comatose Sonic from the possessed Duke and Princess of Soleanna. Forced against their will to do this by Lyra, the jaguars couldn't stop themselves as they were forced to attack their friends and an innocent nurse. Elise was the one they had to look out for due to being skilled in judo and becoming a powerful fighter after years of training. She delivered a powerful chop attack straight into Zoe's gut, causing her to double other and splutter as the wind was knocked out of her. This was one thing Elise had taught Zoe, winding your opponent puts them at bay for a moment and leaves them open for attack. Elise was about to take advantage, raising her hand and preparing to swing it down on to the princess's head. But she never got close for Sonar roundhouse kicked her in the legs, tripping her up and bringing her down onto her stomach. Elise grunted but she didn't stay down for long. She picked herself up and gave Sonar a flat-handed punch to the face that sent her reeling. The nurse staggered, barely keeping herself standing as her head spun from the punch. What a hard hitter the Soleanna Princess was! Zoe ran over to her with concern in her eyes.

"You OK?" she asked.

"Ungh, I feel like I got punched by a rhinoceros..." Sonar grunted, "I'm not really much of a fighter so I can't handle heavy blows like

that for long."

"Well you just help in the best way possible and leave me and mom to do most of the fighting." Zoe suggested, "Maybe you can use that sonic scream again." she added, winking.

The long-eared hedgehog nodded agreeably. She felt like she could use it again so when the time was right, she would unleash it again and knock them back. Zoe turned and watched as the possessed Elise got up to her feet and adopted a combat ready stance, center of gravity balanced and her hands raised in a way that looked as if she was ready to throw a punch. She curled her fingers inwards, daring Zoe to come to her and attack. The princess clenched her fists and prepared to attack herself. But to Elise's surprise, Zoe didn't run to her and throw a punch or a kick. Instead, she spin-dashed straight into Elise and slammed her against the wall, knocking the wind out of her. The princess fell to the floor, trying to catch her breath.

As for Sally, she ducked down as the Duke threw another punch at him. He was clearly a heavy hitter and able to fight but he was poorly trained and undisciplined. He was too predictable, his fighting moves too generic and standard. All he ever did was throw punches, making Sally the better fighter of the two. She weaved around, effortlessly dodging the Duke's blows and then driving her knee straight into the large man's stomach. The Duke was slightly overweight and his huge stomach was mostly composed of soft fat rather than muscle. The bulk of his stomach cushioned some of the blow but it didn't stop him from doubling over in pain. He coughed loudly, trying to keep the air in his lungs. Sally then spun around behind the Duke and closed her hands around his throat. She was intending to cut off the jaguar's air supply, not enough to kill him but enough to knock him out so that Sonar could work out what was causing him to act this way and fix him. She pressed her hand against the Duke's throat, causing him to gasp for air. He was struggling to stay conscious, already seeing black spots in his field of vision.

"I'm so sorry..." Sally whispered, hating herself for having to do this. She could already imagine the punishment she'd be giving to the person who had corrupted the poor man.

But Sally's plan was thrown out the window by a sudden, unexpected twist that caught her off guard. Another pair of hands had grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her away from the Duke. The chipmunk was so surprised that she cried out as she sent spiraling away. Who had done this? It couldn't be Elise! Sally saw that Elise was still tied up with Zoe and Sonar at the moment. That was when she realized. The Duchess had now joined the fight. She had been ordered by Lyra to find Ramirez but seeing that the Duke and Princess needed help, the leech had ordered the Duchess to rejoin the group and even the odds. The female ruler helped her husband to his feet, the latter coughing heavily as he regained his air supply. Then the Duchess ran forward and delivered a powerful karate blow to Sally's face, almost knocking her off her feet. The Duchess was far better trained than the Duke was, knowing standard karate moves and operating with far more discipline than her husband. She would be a tougher opponent to fight. Sally wiped away a smear of blood that trickled down the corner of her lip and sighed.

"I don't want to have to fight you too but if we're going to save you from this mind control..." she mused, her voice like ice.

The female jaguar screeched angrily and charged towards the queen. There was a crazed look in her eyes as she scythed a hand through the air towards the chipmunk's head. She could easily kill her if she wanted to but Lyra had given the family strict orders: no killing anybody who isn't Sonic. They needed Robians to make S.T.I.N.G.'s dream come true. The Duchess's hand nearly hit Sally but the queen ducked down and threw herself into the woman's abdomen. She wrapped her arms around the Soleanna Royal and pushed her off her feet. The two women tumbled down onto the floor with Sally on top and she used all her strength to keep her pinned down. The Duchess struggled to move but she couldn't get the

queen off. Sally was much stronger than she was, making any attempts to get up again useless. The Duke tried to help but Sonar kicked him in the back of the knees to bring him down onto the floor.

"Sonar, see if there's a hypodermic syringe we can use!" Sally shouted, "We can use it to knock them out so they can't try to kill Sonic anymore!"

The nurse-hog nodded and ran over to a nearby tray of medical tools that was waiting to be used. There were bandages, First Aid kit boxes, medicines and surgical tools on the tray. They had been kept there since when Sonic had been brought in earlier, the medical staff had thought surgery would be needed. How fortunate they had left it behind now! Sonar saw a syringe and picked it up. It was empty though the long-eared hedgehog had seen among the bottles of medicine that there was a fluid that could be pumped into the bloodstream that would draw people into unconsciousness. She filled the needle up and ran over to the pinned down Duchess as she tried to get back up. She was about to jab her with the needle but somebody crashed into Sonar and knocked her off her feet. Elise had managed to overpower Zoe and throw her into the nurse hog, knocking her on the floor. The needle hadn't broken so they could still use it. Sally seized it, intending to keep it away from the mind-controlled family so they couldn't use it on her, Zoe or Sonar. Elise ran towards the queen, intending to snatch the syringe but Zoe seized her by the ankle and tripped her up. Elise grunted as she hit the floor.

Sally was tempted to come closer and inject the princess but she kept her distance, knowing that Elise could still attack and maybe take the needle away. Instead, she stayed back while Zoe and Sonar grabbed the judo champion's arms and pinned the princess down. Elise struggled, desperate to get free. Now she couldn't fight back, Sally knelt down and jabbed Elise in the neck with the needle. She inserted some of the liquid into the princess, making sure to save some so the Duke and Duchess could be subdued, and watched as Elise's struggle got weaker and weaker. She was struggling to stay

awake, her eyes drooping shut and her body relaxing as she slowly slid into unconsciousness. The Duke and Duchess watched with horror as their daughter was knocked out.

"Elise!" the Duke cried, "This is bad! Mommy will be very disappointed with us!"

"We must stop them!" the Duchess screeched, "We can't fail our mommy!"

The two parents ran towards the girls but Sonar had been anticipating such a move. She leapt to her feet, turned around and opened her mouth. Sally and Zoe covered their ears as she let fly another sonic-scream at the Duke and Duchess. To them, it felt as if they'd just been punched by a very large fist as the sonic waves slammed into them and threw them back. They were slammed against the wall as if hit by a car and pinned there by it and they were powerless to move as Sonar kept the scream up. Their ears were screaming in protest as the sound tore through their eardrums. The scream then faded and the two royals were left lying on the floor, trying to recover from the powerful attack. Sonar panted and wiped her forehead, relieved that she didn't' need to go any further.

"Whew...thank goodness...I was afraid I might end up cracking the walls!" she gasped.

Sally leapt up to her feet and quickly injected the Duke and Duchess with the hypodermic needle, first injecting the Duke and then the Duchess. The two Royals tried to fight back against the needle's effects but they may as well have been fighting an impossible battle. They couldn't remain conscious as the needle's substance kicked in. It was almost like their bodies were being shut down from the inside. Their eyes closed and they lay still on the floor. Pleased to see they were all subdued, Sally wiped her forehead.

"Thank goodness for that." she said, "It's horrible that they've been forced to fight us like this."

"Yeah, especially since me and Elise are great friends." Zoe muttered, "Who did this to them and how? No doubt S.T.I.N.G. are the culprits but that still begs the question: how?"

"I think I might know..." Sonar murmured.

She knelt down beside the unconscious Elise and observed her. When it came to the Mobian body, Sonar could notice the tiniest of changes and anomalies, even if you so much as had a tiny scratch on you. She never missed a trick. Sonar was quick to notice that Elise was pale, too pale to be considered normal, and during the fight, the nurse had noticed that the princess, and the Duke and Duchess all had grey eyes. That wasn't normal too. She noticed something else as she turned the jaguar onto her stomach. There were holes in her dress, suggesting that something had penetrated the material and stabbed into her back. Sonar observed the holes and saw little pinpricks set in Elise's skin. They were round, blackish red circles that looked ugly on the woman's otherwise perfect skin. This meant she had been stung by something...or somebody. This gave the nurse an idea on what they were dealing with.

"I was beginning to wonder if that was the case..." Sonar murmured, "I've dealt with cases like this before. Some Mobians have poison that allows them to mind-control people if they inject it into the body. The poison doesn't kill, it just messes your brain up and makes you the poisoner's puppet."

"So that's why Elise and her parents were attacking us!" Zoe exclaimed, "Somebody poisoned them and took control of them to make them do what he or she wanted!"

"But who could possibly have such power?" Sally wondered, "Which Mobians are able to do this?"

"It depends." Sonar explained, "There isn't just one particular Mobian who has this poison they can use on people. And not everybody who has the power actually uses it since some Mobians are too decent

for that. Some reptilian species have the power, some insects have the power. But the power is most commonly a trait of..."

She paused as she observed the pinpricks again.

"...leeches." the nurse-hog finished.

That explained everything. Sally and Zoe remembered Sora's recorded conversation with Ramirez the Chameleon that she had played for them. Ramirez had told the vixen spy that he had been working with Akhlut the Orca and Lyra...the Leech. They now knew exactly who had done it. It was a S.T.I.N.G. member after all!

"I knew it! I fucking knew it!" Zoe shouted angrily, "I knew it was a S.T.I.N.G. agent! And it's obviously that bitch Lyra since she's a leech! Tails was right, there was something Ramirez hadn't told us and it was the fact Lyra has mind-control powers!"

"Zoe, I've told you a thousand times already, stop swearing." Sally said in annoyance, "But yes, Tails was right. Ramirez WAS still hiding something from us. He conveniently didn't tell us that Lyra had mind-control powers."

"I can't imagine Sora will be too pleased with him in that regard..." Zoe growled, "It also explains why they were saying "mommy" too. Lyra's probably broken them to the point they view her as their "mommy" or something."

"Venom like this can reduce people to a childlike state or make them desperately loyal to the poisoner..." Sonar murmured, shaking her head disapprovingly, "It's disgusting frankly and I wish somebody would outlaw this power. But the police demand that it not be outlawed since a power like that can be useful in making people crack and spill their secrets."

"I know, that's why we let people with power like this roam freely, as long as they use it sensibly." Sally said, "Is there a cure Doctor Sonar?"

The nurse-hog beamed happily, clearly pleased with the answer she was about to give.

"Oh yes indeed your majesty." Sonar said proudly, "There is indeed a cure. A medicine was invented to combat the poison if anybody had been given the venom and we needed to cure them. And also, my healing power can combat the venom and destroy it completely. I'll be able to free these poor people from this Lyra woman's control."

With that said, she got up onto her feet and dragged the Duke and Duchess over to Elise so she could heal them all at once. As she prepared the process, Sally took out Nicole's handheld form, which she kept on a strap around her calf under her dress. She opened the computer up and was met with the sight of Nicole's digital face on the screen.

"Yes Sally. How may I help you?" Nicole asked politely.

"Give an urgent message to Tails and his team NOW Nicole. They need to know that the S.T.I.N.G. apparently named Lyra the Leech has mind-control powers and they have to make sure she doesn't bite or sting them or they'll end up under her control. It's vital you tell them this."

"I'll pass the message on at once my friend." Nicole said brightly.

With that taken care of, Sally put Nicole back under her dress and looked over as Sonar placed her hands on the three royals, her left hand between Elise and the Duchess and her right hand between Elise and the Duke, and closed her eyes. Her hands began to glow and the healing process began to commence once more. This wouldn't take long and wouldn't tire Sonar out for it was a much smaller case and required less of her power to fix it. The queen and princess watched as the nurse's magical power began to emit, bathing the room in a soothing green glow just as it had before. As they watched, they failed to notice that the hedgehog they'd been protecting from the corrupted royals was twitching ever so slightly in his bed...

Although Nicole was passing on the message Sally had given her to Tails and his team, Tails would be the one person who wouldn't be getting the message. The twin-tailed fox moaned quietly to himself as he began to stir. The first thing he was aware of was that his head was splitting. It felt as if a hand had phased through his skull and squeezed his brain like a sponge. The headache made him feel a little sick inside but he didn't feel like throwing up. He grunted as he shifted, his consciousness beginning to return to him. He was aware that something didn't feel quite right. His arms were raised but he wasn't sure why. He could feel something around his wrists but again, he didn't know why. His eyes slowly opened and he let out a sickly moan as if he'd woken up form a hangover. As Tails was beginning to wake up, several thoughts came flooding back to him.

Flying in the X-Tornado with Cosmo, Ruben and Sora, arriving at Orca Island, sneaking into the base, getting past the guards, switching off the traps. And then...this. This moment of waking up with a splitting headache. He couldn't remember what had happened and how this had happened. He would soon find out.

Tails opened his eyes fully, taking in the room he was now in. He was in an icy blue room that had huge chunks of ice dotted around and a pool of water on his left. Tails had no doubt that it was deathly cold in the pool and made a mental note to go nowhere near it. He also noticed that there was a crane with a control panel at the base. And he also realized that he was attached to it. Tails looked up and gasped with horror. His hands had been chained together above his head and were held aloft by the crane. He couldn't go anywhere and he knew it. Tails also noticed that his arm gauntlets and his goggles had been confiscated. His arms were bare and he had nothing above his eyes. He also noticed his tails had been tied together, preventing him from spinning them around for any reason. Whoever had done this to him clearly wasn't taking any chances. Tails could feel his heart pounding. He'd been captured and chained up and was now at the mercy of whoever had done this to him! He had to escape and fast!

Tails struggled furiously pulling on his hands and trying to wriggle free. What would happen if Cosmo, Sora and Ruben found him here? He'd be used as a hostage, that much was certain and he couldn't let S.T.I.N.G. take advantage of him like this. Not when it could result in him being roboticized.

"Come on, please, break!" he grunted to himself as he wriggled his hands desperately to try and get them loose.

"I don't see the point in struggling little boy. You're not going anywhere and you'll never get free." a deep voice boomed around the room, making Tails look around frantically.

"What? Who's there? Did you chain me up like this?!" the fox exclaimed.

"I sure did. I can't let you wander free when I need some bait to hook a very special trio of fish I've got my eye on..." the voice replied.

Tails turned and saw a huge shape emerging from the darkness towards him. He saw a huge killer whale with a metal fin on his head, a yellow vest with a metal apparatus on the back of his shoulders, arm and leg gauntlets and evil green eyes. He also had a cut on his cheek that had scabbed over, a reminder of what Cosmo had done to him. Tails had no doubt who this was for this orca matched what Cosmo had glimpsed of him earlier. Metal fin, yellow vest, it had to be the man he had come to arrest himself. His face contorted with anger as his kidnapper came towards him.

"So I assume you're Akhlut the Orca then?" he said coldly.

"In the flesh!" Akhlut proudly announced, "I must say, it's quite an honour to be in the presence of a famed hero such as yourself Miles Prower. Or do you prefer "Tails" instead?" he sneered.

Tails's eyes narrowed down into slits of pure hatred. This was the man who had shot Sonic and nearly killed him so just looking at him was enough to make him feel a burning sense of anger that he

wanted to unleash on this vile Mobian. He was so full of rage that it hadn't even occurred to him to ask how Akhlut even knew his two names, though he assumed that S.T.I.N.G. probably had files on the Royal Fighters and thus, knew all their names anyway.

"You tried to kill my best friend." Tails said coldly, "You shot him in the back and nearly killed him in the result! Doing so not only nearly took my best friend away but you also ruined mine and my sister's weddings! Why?! Why did you do it?! Why would you want to do it?!"

Akhlut snorted as if the questions were too stupid to answer.

"I'd have thought you'd have figured it already." he crowed, "I'm sure you've managed to work out that I work for S.T.I.N.G. Tails so shouldn't that answer your questions?"

"I know you work for S.T.I.N.G. Akhlut, I'm just wondering WHY you'd want to work for them and try to kill the Hero of Mobius!" the fox retorted angrily, "He risked life and limb for us to keep our planet safe! He even willingly took on Enerjak and prevented the end of the world! We'd all be dead if it wasn't for him and you want to kill him! Why is S.T.I.N.G. so damn ungrateful?!"

"UNGRATEFUL?!" the orca exploded, his calm demeanour quickly replaced by one of pure anger.

He backhanded Tails across the face, hitting him so hard that the gadgeteer was amazed he hadn't been knocked out again. He was left spinning around on the spot, the chains holding his hands aloft the only thing keeping him standing. Tails let out a groan of pain as his head swam from the punch. A trickle of blood seeped down the corner of his mouth. Akhlut stared down at his prisoner, resisting the urge to break him in half.

"How exactly are WE the ungrateful ones?!" he snapped, "Eggman introduced technology that could save lives! SAVE. LIVES! And you act like that's a bad thing! Think of all the good that roboticization can do for the world! Hell, look it what did to me!" he added, pulling his

vest up and showing off the scar on his chest, "See this scar? I got that after a battle with an asshole named Tundra! I could've died after that fight but S.T.I.N.G. found me and using Eggman's technology, they saved my life and mended my wounds!"

Tails stared at the scar in disbelief.

"You mean...S.T.I.N.G. actually saved your life?" he murmured.

"Exactly." Akhlut growled, "Thanks to Eggman's technology, I'm alive and able to continue my life as a proud warrior and leader of an army of orca soldiers that crave battle, blood spilling and conquest! I even managed to get revenge on Tundra and finish him off for nearly killing me! I'm very grateful to S.T.I.N.G. for giving me the chance to redeem myself and get my vengeance. I'm one of S.T.I.N.G.'s eleven Grandmasters, with my own section of Mobius to rule over! I'm very grateful that S.T.I.N.G. used Eggman's technology to give me a second chance like this! And please little brat, tell me how WE are the ungrateful ones when you and your filthy friends are the ones who rejected Eggman's vision and declared him as the villain despite introducing revolutionary technology that can save lives and make people stronger!"

He finished his sentence with an animal growl that made Tails shudder uncomfortably. The twin-tailed fox took in what the killer whale had said and thought about it. He supposed Akhlut had a point. Maybe S.T.I.N.G. weren't that ungrateful after all. But that didn't make their motives any better and the fox was determined to make Akhlut see reason.

"You made your point, but here's my counter argument." he began, carefully choosing his words for he didn't want Akhlut to hit him again, "You misunderstand me and my friends Akhlut. We didn't brand Eggman a villain because the technology is evil, we branded him a villain because of HOW he used the technology was bad. He used the roboticzation thing for all the wrong reasons. He wasn't interested in saving lives and improving anything, he just wanted to enslave us all and make us his loyal servants! That's why we fought

against him! And the fact you seem to think that Eggman was RIGHT for doing this deeply concerns me..."

"Don't you try playing the saint with me fox boy!" Akhlut snapped, "You're in no position to try and shame us for our methods when you're hardly any better considering Sonic the Hedgehog murdered Dr. Eggman just because he and the rest of your group couldn't see the benefits of his vision of a perfect world!"

"Why do you dumbasses think that Sonic murdered Eggman? He had nothing to do with it!" Tails screamed, "It was Dr. Finitevus who killed Eggman, not Sonic so stop taking issue with him over something he didn't do!"

"Bah, your lies will not save you Tails so don't even try it!" the orca retorted, "But that's irrelevant now. You're gonna answer me some very important questions that I need to know and you'll not try to resist me because I'll get what I want anyway..."

He leaned in closer to his prisoner, his green eyes baring into Tails's blue ones. The fox gulped, feeling uneasy with the enormous Mobian so close to him.

"My friend Lyra the Leech managed to find out that you found out that I'm the one who shot Sonic. You know my name, meaning you must've gotten Ramirez to tell you it since only he could've told you that. He's the only S.T.I.N.G. agent you have in your custody and only S.T.I.N.G. agents know who I am so only he could've told you." Akhlut growled menacingly, his voice quiet but still very threatening, "The same goes to this island. Nobody knows I'm here except S.T.I.N.G. So you're going to tell me what information you coaxed out of Ramirez. If you don't, I can make this very unpleasant for you."

That made Tails raise an eyebrow in confusion. How had Lyra managed to find out that he'd found out who shot Sonic and what his name was? Lyra couldn't possibly have spied on the R.F.S. could she?! Tails's eyes narrowed and he clenched his teeth in defiance. He maybe chained up and helpless but he wasn't going to budge.

"Go to hell! I'm not telling you anything!" he snarled, "And I don't care what you do to me, I'll never break! Not even Dr. Finitevus roboticizing me could break me!"

Akhlut was still and silent for a moment but then he had an unexpected reaction to Tails's defiance. He...grinned as if the whole thing had amused him! The fox recoiled, still weary that Akhlut could react very violently despite this.

"You know, if you weren't Sonic the Hedgehog's personal lap-dog, I'd find it really hard to dislike you with such courage and determination you're displaying!" the sea mammal chortled, "I rather like your headstrong nature little shrimp, I really do! But your hubris won't protect you. Like I said, you're going to tell me what I want to know anyway, defiance or not..."

Tails was about to give the orca a long winded lecture on how out of his depth he was if he thought he could make him crack but something stopped him dead in his tracks. He let out a yelp of pain as something jabbed into his back. He grimaced as the pain flared through him, wondering what it was that was doing it. It was a stinger and the stingers belonged to the other elitist who Ramirez had told Sora he was working with...Lyra the Leech. The crazed Grandmaster had been hiding, waiting for Akhlut to give her the signal to come out and do her stuff. She had managed to be surprisingly quiet, sneaking up behind Tails without the captive Royal Fighter hearing so much as a footstep and now she was pumping him full of her venom. Tails's mouth dropped open as his eyes began to change colour, from blue to grey. His face was vacant, no expression whatsoever as he fell under the leech's control. Lyra grinned delightedly. It felt good to be mind-controlling a Royal Fighter and thanks to her, Tails would reveal everything they needed to know. As she finished, she cupped her hands around the fox's chest, shamelessly groping him while he was helpless.

"You've been a very bad boy Mr. Prower!" she sneered in a condescending tone, "Now mommy's had to punish you with a very

nasty sting! You didn't like that did you? Oh no. Now are you going to behave and tell my good pal Akhlut what he wants to know?"

"Yes." Tails mumbled. His voice sounded distant, not quite his own.

"So go on then, tell Akhlut what he wants to know!" Lyra snapped, her face twisted in an insane smile of pleasure.

The fox stared straight ahead, looking as if he didn't know where he was. Akhlut folded his arms, waiting for his prisoner to speak.

"My sister Sora was the one who made Ramirez talk." he droned, "Ramirez told us that you and Lyra were the ones who tried to kill Sonic and where you live. That's how we knew we'd find you here."

"Is Sonic dead?" Akhlut asked. He was sure he already knew the answer but he had a feeling asking the question would reveal some interesting information.

"No. He was saved by a nurse with a magical healing power named Sonar. He's alive." Tails answered. Deep inside, his mind was screaming at him not to tell Akhlut anything but Lyra's control was total, meaning he couldn't refuse as the leech willed him to answer.

"And finally, where is Ramirez being held?" the orca asked.

"He's in the New Mobotropolis Detention Centre." the fox answered, "Wilson and Mandy took him there themselves."

The killer whale smiled an icy smile of delight as he took this in. The R.F.S. thought they'd managed to get a step ahead by making Ramirez talk but now he'd thrown them back to square one by getting some information too. And he also knew that Sonic was still alive and how! He'd be sure to pass that onto Scorn later. For now, he had something important to take care of, something that would make Scorn very pleased with him.

"Thank you, that was all I needed to hear." Akhlut purred, "Lyra, if you don't mind, you can go and rescue Ramirez. Your mind-control powers will make the job easy and grant his freedom."

"Good thing I knew where New Mobotropolis is!" Lyra piped excitedly, "And the prison shouldn't be hard to find, I'll be in and out with Ramirez in tow! I'll just leave you to do what you wish with Tails, I don't want him as a dolly or anything. He's all yours."

With that said, she skipped merrily out of the room to carry out her task. Given S.T.I.N.G. had teleportation technology, she wouldn't take long to get to New Mobotropolis. As soon as Lyra left, Akhlut reached into his pocket and took out a small capsule that contained a green coloured liquid and he opened it up. It had a cure for Lyra's poison, something Scorn had provided all S.T.I.N.G. agents with for emergency measures and in case Lyra ever went rogue for whatever reason. He felt his plan to capture Tails's friends by using him as a hostage would work better if he was back to normal, plus it would hide the fact Lyra had mind control powers. It would be better if the R.F.S. didn't know that about her. He forced the capsule between Tails's lips and made him drink the liquid. The cure worked almost immediately, restoring Tails's eyes to normal and snapping him out of his blank slate. He coughed, the bad taste of the cure hanging on his tongue, and he looked around wildly as if he'd forgotten where he was.

"Huh, what happened?" he murmured, "It's almost like I fell asleep for a minute."

"You decided to comply and tell me what I wanted." the killer whale lied, "Now you're going to do another favour for me. You see, I was in the control room when you shut off my traps and called your friends to tell me it was safe to come into my base and arrest me. So now I'm going to use you as bait to make them surrender to me. I'm lying the perfect trap and they're going to fall right into it!"

He cackled gleefully, clearly pleased with himself on what he was about to do. Tails's face contorted with anger as he took this in. He

couldn't let Akhlut do this, not when his friends could complete the mission and arrest him! He had to escape and fast or the mission would be compromised. He began tugging on his chains, desperately trying to free his hands. Akhlut just laughed at him as he took out a roll of tape and ripped off a piece, slapping it onto Tails's mouth and gagging him. The fox let out muffled grumbles behind the gag, still trying to get free. It was as if he didn't even care that he couldn't talk now. As he struggled, Akhlut walked away from him and headed to the crane. He switched on the machine, a mechanical whirring sound filling the room as it came into life and Akhlut grabbed the controls.

He operated the small crane with expert ease, making Tails wonder for a moment how many times he had done this to his victims and if he wasn't going to be the last one. The crane's arm raised, pulling Tails up off the floor by the chains around his wrists. The Royal Fighter inventor winced in agony as his arms screamed in protest. They weren't built for carrying his entire bodyweight and he could feel the strain as he dangled by his wrists. He watched as the crane turned, carrying him over the pool of icy water nearby. He looked down at the water below him, wondering for a heart-stopping moment of Akhlut was going to drop him in. He had no doubt that if he was dropped in, he would freeze instantly. Akhlut saw the fear on his prisoner's face and he laughed tauntingly.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna dip you in the water!" he crowed, "You're just going to stay hanging there until your friends show up. And then I'm going to threaten to drop you in if they don't surrender! Once they do, they'll be mine to do with as I please and I'll make them all my loyal slaves until S.T.I.N.G. is ready to carry out its big plan to make the world a perfect place for us all to live! You know what I mean and you probably don't agree it'll be a perfect world but...I don't care." he sniffed.

Tails knew exactly what Akhlut meant and it made him cringe just thinking about. A Robian world much like the one Dr. Eggman wanted to make a reality was the kind of world S.T.I.N.G. would want

to create but he didn't want to be a part of it. He looked up at his hands helplessly as he tried to figure out a way to escape. He had to get out of here or he and his friends would be forced to serve Akhlut...and then later on...become Robians for S.T.I.N.G.'s ideal world...

This is not good at all. Tails has been captured, Lyra's on her way to rescue Ramirez and Cosmo, Sora and Ruben are walking into a trap!

How will the heroes possibly win this one? Well, we'll find out next time as we begin the "Battle of Orca Island"...

Double Weddings: Chapter 6

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 6: The Battle of Orca Island

Tails was in big trouble right now, being used as bait to make his friends surrender.

But of course, his fiancée Cosmo, his sister Sora and his friend Ruben had no idea about this. They had just managed to get onto the island thanks to the tech-wiz vulpine shutting off Akhlut's traps. They hadn't swum in the water ring around the island for they knew it would just make them too cold and slow down their progress. Instead, Ruben had used his water powers to catapult himself and anybody clinging onto his back over the water and onto the island. First he'd carried Sora over, the vixen hanging onto him as he rocketed into the air with a jet of water out of his hands. Then he'd gone back over to fetch Cosmo, doing the same thing with her as she held onto him. The three were now successfully on Orca Island and since Tails had switched the traps off, they didn't have to take their time. They ran straight through the inactive minefield, smirking to themselves. How cross Akhlut would be if he could see that his precious traps weren't doing anything!

Despite not having to be aware of any traps, the three still made sure that they didn't run into any guards. They would be able to take them out easily but they preferred the idea of getting to Akhlut with little resistance in their way. They'd need their full strength if they were to combat a member of S.T.I.N.G.'s Elite Eleven. As they crossed the minefield, they slowed down their approach and kept an eye out for any guards on patrol. There were orcas roaming all around the perimeter, keeping their beady eyes out for any signs of intruders. They hadn't yet noticed that they had three that were sneaking in under their noses. That made Sora smirk confidently. Akhlut clearly had very undisciplined guards if they were this inept at their jobs. No

wonder the S.T.I.N.G. Grandmaster felt the need to booby-trap his lair, the guards certainly weren't the ones keeping people out! Keeping close to the ground, the vixen, panther and Seedrian approached the entrance to the base while still keeping an eye on the guards. There was a chance that they could be spotted even if it hadn't happened yet.

After a slow and quiet approach, the trio managed to reach the base. To Sora's surprise and suspicion, there didn't seem to be any guards at the door. That puzzled her. Why would Akhlut not have any guards by his front door? Was he so stupidly dependent on his traps that he didn't feel the need to protect his base in the event that somebody actually managed to get past them? Or did Akhlut WANT them to get in his base? No, that was impossible. Akhlut didn't even know they were here so how could he be lying in wait for them?And he certainly wouldn't have let Tails shut off the traps! She shook the thoughts out of her head. The orca clearly wasn't as clever as he thought he was. Cosmo stepped forward and opened the door, allowing herself, Ruben and Sora to walk inside. She was expecting some resistant to be behind the door and that she and her friends would be shot at.

But much to the alien-plant's surprise...there was nobody there! She was so surprised at this that she let out a flat "Oh". The hall was completely empty, not so much as a guard on patrol! Cosmo ran a hand through her leafy hair in confusion.

"OK, this is too weird by far..." she murmured, "Why is Akhlut's base so understaffed? Those booby-traps Tails disabled indicates that he's a guy who loves his high security."

"You're telling me Cosmo." Sora sighed, "This is just looking...I dunno, too easy? Like Akhlut WANTS us to enter?"

"But he doesn't know we're here! How can he be setting a trap for us?" Ruben protested, "He can't possibly know we're here!"

"He's a S.T.I.N.G. member hon, we can't underestimate their intelligence and resources." the vixen replied, patting her fiance on

the shoulder, "Akhlut may well be EXPECTING us given he left Ramirez behind. It doesn't take a genius to work out that we would've made him crack and all that."

"Well having little guards is going to be his undoing." Cosmo declared, "He's expecting us but he doesn't know we've managed to bypass his traps and get on the island. Although I am beginning to wonder where my Tails is. He said he'd meet us on the ground floor, which is where we are now!" she exclaimed.

It was true. The one who had shut down the traps and made it possible to get onto the island in the first place was nowhere to be seen. That made Sora feel even more uneasy. Her nerves tingled.

"Oh no...my brother's not here. I hope this doesn't mean that...that..." she stammered.

"Please don't fret my love, I'm sure he's on his way to us now." Ruben said softly, running a gentle hand down the vixen's arms.

"It depends how high up the control room is." Cosmo agreed, "It could just be taking him a while to get down to us. He'll be there soon."

And that was the part where they received a call from Nicole. She had been asked to pass on vital information to the team and now Sora was receiving a soft bleeping sound on her communications device. She opened it up and spoke into it.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Hello Sora. It's Nicole. Sally has told me to pass on some crucial info that'll help you in your mission." the A.I. lynx replied, "Sally, Zoe and Sonar were attacked by Princess Elise and her parents, who were apparently under mind-control. Sonar tells us that some Mobians can control others with a sting that injects some kind of venom into the body and leeches are among the ones that can use

said power. So we believe Lyra the Leech has mind-control powers and thus, you must be careful if you engage her."

Sora took all of this in with silence. Her face contorted with anger. Tails had been right! Ramirez HAD been hiding something after all! His brief description of Lyra hadn't revealed everything about her! Thanks to Ramirez, she, Cosmo and Ruben could've fallen victim to the leech's power and thus, the mission would've been jeopardized! Just for that, she was going to carry out her threat of making him disappear forever to show him what happens to those who keep information hidden. She nodded slowly.

"Thank you so much for telling us this Nicole." she said coldly, "Pass this message on to everybody. Not just the R.F.S., EVERYBODY. If Lyra does indeed have mind-control powers, we can't have her trying to take control of anybody. Last thing we need is the chance event that she takes control of a policeman and makes him or her release Ramirez or any criminals S.T.I.N.G. could probably try to sway to their side."

"I was thinking the same thing Sora. I'll do just that." the lynx said, "Good luck with your mission."

She then switched off, leaving Sora to put the device back on her belt. The vixen turned to her friends, her face colder than a winter's day in White Acropolis.

"My brother was right, Ramirez WAS hiding something still." she growled, "I've just been informed that Lyra the Leech has mind-control powers. She controlled Elise and her family and made them attack Sally, Zoe and Sonar, presumably to try and make them kill Sonic. So now we've got to be extra careful and make sure she can't sting us or we'll be her puppets. And we can't afford to be mind-controlled right now..."

"I had a feeling we should've probed further..." Ruben muttered, "Why were we so stupid?!"

"Well at least we're making up for this mistake now Ruben." Cosmo said softly, "I bet Sora will do what she threatened to do to Ramirez now to make him pay for withholding information from us like that."

"Oh I am. I SO am!" Sora snarled, "Ramirez won't ever see the light of day again when I'm done with him! And when he goes insane from loneliness and isolation, he'll crack and tell us what we want to know and this time, he WON'T be hiding anything."

"We've got to find Tails and warn him about Lyra." the Seedrian declared, "Can you track him Sora and see where he is?"

"Of course. What kind of spy DOESN'T have a way of keeping track of her comrades?" the spy retorted.

She took out an orb from her belt and opened it up. The orb had a screen that would show her where her comrades were should they get separated or lost and help her find them. There was a red dot on the screen, signifying where Tails was. It wasn't moving, suggesting he was quite still. The screen also displayed some schematics that showed where in the building he was. He wasn't very high up, only a couple of floors above them. That was lucky, they didn't have long to find him. Though why wasn't he moving? He said he would meet them on the ground floor so he shouldn't be standing still. Tiny seeds of doubt began sowing themselves into Sora's mind, making her feel very uneasy.

"He's two floors up, but he's standing still for some reason." Sora announced.

"But why? He's supposed to be meeting us here." Ruben noted.

"He must be in trouble or he's lost." Cosmo fretted, "Let's get to him quickly."

There was a staircase nearby that led up to the other floors of the base so the trio quickly ran over to it and began running up it to reach Tails. They were thankful that they didn't have long to climb

given he was only a couple of floors up. They'd traverse the short climb up in no time. After barely a minute had passed, the three Mobians had reached the third floor and Sora peered at her orb again to see where on this floor Tails was. They were in a corridor which stretched a long way down and had many doors. The orb seemed to be indicating that Tails was in the door at the end of this corridor. She looked up and saw it, running down towards it with Cosmo and Ruben right behind her. As they approached the door, they could see that there were warning stripes on the top and bottom of the door and the words "Danger: Ice Cold Water. Enter with caution" printed in the middle. That made the trio wonder for a moment. Was Tails not moving because he was in this room and frozen solid? They would find out very shortly as they approached the door and Cosmo pushed a button on the side of the door to open it up. Akhlut clearly wasn't the kind of guy who believed in hand-print scanners and security codes.

What they didn't know was that the button on the door was actually hand-print sensitive. Only Akhlut was supposed to be able to open it. He had disabled the feature because he WANTED Tails's friends to break in easily. On any other day, the feature would be active and nobody would get through this door without blowing it down. Cosmo ran in first with Sora and Ruben behind her...and the Seedrian screamed in horror. Now they understood why Tails hadn't been moving. He COULDN'T move. He was dangling by chains wrapped around his wrists above a huge pool of icy water with his tails tied together, completely unable to escape. His gauntlets and goggles were gone, further explaining why he couldn't get free. The fox saw his friends and tried to call out a warning to them but the tape on his mouth prevented him from saying anything. Akhlut was standing nearby, a can of chum in his hand and he titled it up into his mouth. He chewed vigorously on his meal and swallowed, turning his head to see his visitors. He grinned, clearly pleased to see them. Now Cosmo could get a closer look at Akhlut, taking in the huge muscles, the chunky arm and leg gauntlets, the metal fin and the yellow jacket with metal apparatus clipped on the back of his shoulders. He definitely was the one she'd seen on the roof back at the wedding.

She even noticed the still healing cut on his face that she'd inflicted on him. No wonder Tails had been captured like this, Akhlut looked incredibly formidable. She knew for a fact that she wouldn't last five seconds in a fight against him, even if she had managed to hold her own against Owen Pounder once.

"Greetings Royal Fighters!" the killer whale announced happily, "Welcome to my Ice Dungeon! I was just grabbing some lunch while I waited for you." he said, chowing down on another mouthful of chum. The smell that drifted up from the can was revolting and the Royal Fighters had to wonder how he was able to put up with it.

"Let my fiancé go now!" Cosmo demanded angrily, "You let him go this minute or I'll cut the other side of your face!"

"Ah, so you're the one who threw that weapon at me!" Akhlut purred, pretending to be surprised. He already knew who Cosmo was, "I must say little girl, you're one hell of a good shot! I was surprised that you actually managed to hit me! I owe you a broken arm or maybe a broken leg for that..." he said, his voice suddenly cold and menacing as if a dial had been turned and his personality had switched from jovial to menacing.

"You dare touch Cosmo and you'll get some from me!" Ruben growled, "Now let Tails go Akhlut and maybe we'll be generous enough to bring you in unhurt!"

The orca's black and white face cracked into a confident smirk that suggested he wasn't intimidated in the slightest. In fact, he looked as if the whole thing was a joke as far as he was concerned.

"You're in no position to give orders water boy." he sneered, "You've been played for a sucker from the very start Royal Fighters. Scorn knew that you'd find out I was the assassin given the evidence I left behind so he set me up here to receive you. Also Lyra had control of the Soleanna Royals and through them, she heard from Sally that you managed to deduce my identity and make Ramirez talk. So I was lying in wait for you, waiting for you all to come right into my

trap. I even allowed Tails here to turn off my traps just so you could get across and then I made your way inside pathetically easy just so you could get there quicker. How does it feel to be outsmarted by your superiors once more cretins?" he crowed, laughing with delight over what he'd said.

The Royal Fighters all fell silent, as if they couldn't believe what they'd heard. Akhlut had been expecting them and like idiots, they'd just stumbled right into what should've been an obvious trap! And now Tails was in his custody and one button away from dipping into ice cold water! They had no doubt that the sheer low temperatures of the water would kill Tails instantly the moment he was submerged in it. And all because they had been foolish enough to think they were a step ahead! Akhlut tossed his now empty chum can into the water and strode over to the crane.

"Now you've got two options my ridiculous Royal Fighters." he crooned, "You can surrender yourselves and become prisoners of S.T.I.N.G. Or you can watch as Tails freezes to death. You can't do anything to save him so don't bother trying. All I have to do is lower the crane and he's history..."

He grabbed the lever that would make the crane arm move up and down and kept it there. Tails squirmed frantically, pleading for Akhlut not to pull the lever down. Cosmo watched with tears in her eyes, unable to move as she saw her beloved's terrified eyes.

"NO!" she whimpered, "Oh please Akhlut, please don't kill him! I beg of you!" the Seedrian cried, "Please don't kill him! We were supposed to be getting married today! Surely you wouldn't be so heartless as to kill a betrothed?!"

"I willingly kill anybody I disagree with." Akhlut snorted, "I don't give a shit that you're getting married Cosmo. That'll just make Tails's death more satisfying as I get to see your reaction. However, if you surrender yourself, and same goes to Sora and Ruben, I might allow you two to get married in a lonely prison cell at S.T.I.N.G.'s base. It'll

be better than becoming a widow before you even marry him won't it?"

Cosmo stared at Akhlut and then back at her fiancé. She could tell from his face that he was pleading with her not to surrender. He was shaking his head and making muffled sounds that sounded like he was trying to say, "Don't do it Cosmo!". But what could the Seedrian do? What could Sora or Ruben do for that matter? If they so much as moved, Akhlut could pull the lever and dunk Tails in. It was rather clever how the orca had set it up. Nobody could do anything without ending with him pulling the lever down. They were well and truly stuck. Cosmo could feel the tears raining down her face more heavily, unable to keep it in. She couldn't lose her beloved Tails, not when today was meant to be the happiest day of their lives! Maybe if she surrendered now, they could escape S.T.I.N.G. later. Swallowing hard, knowing she was going to regret what she was going to say, she got down on her knees and put her hands behind her head.

"I surrender. Please...just don't kill my fiancé." she begged.

Tails tried to scream his disapproval, but to no avail. Ruben and Sora could tell he wasn't happy with his soon-to-be-wed's decision but they both knew Cosmo made the right choice. There was nothing they could do. Like it or not, surrender was the best option. Sighing in defeat, Sora and Ruben mirrored Cosmo's pose together.

"We surrender too." Sora said, "I couldn't live with myself, knowing that I'm responsible for my brother's death."

"We'll do as you ask as long as you spare Tails." Ruben said grimly.

Akhlut grinned with satisfaction, pleased to see that his enemies had done what he'd told them. The plan had worked and now Tails's friends were at his mercy! But he knew full well that they could still try and get the drop on him so he stayed where he was, not removing his hand from the lever. Tails stared at his friends, clearly worried on what was going to happen next.

"Good Royal Fighters." the warrior-turned-S.T.I.N.G. agent purred, "Now then, I want you all to come to me one by one. I'm going to prepare you for your new lives as S.T.I.N.G. prisoners."

Of course, he actually intended to bug all three of them as he had done Tails and he didn't care if anybody witnessed it. All three Royal Fighters wouldn't remember it anyway, an ingenious idea on Swoop's part when he'd created the machine in the first place. The bug would make them forget it had ever happened, just like it had done with Zoe. Sora stood up first and approached the orca. As she did though, she turned and winked at Cosmo and Ruben. That made the two stare at her in confusion. But then they realized what she meant by that wink. She had a plan. They watched with baited breath as Sora came up to Akhlut with her hands behind her back. They saw her take an orb from the back of her belt and close her hand around it. She stood in front of Akhlut and handed him the orb. The orca stared at it in confusion, holding it between one huge finger and his equally as huge thumb. Tails watched, knowing for a fact that his sister was clearly baiting Akhlut.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Given we're going to be your prisoners now, I thought I may as well give you this." the spy said glumly, "It contains all the secrets of the R.F.S., I thought you'd want it."

"Hmm...I didn't think you Royal Fighters were such defeatists..." Akhlut sneered, "Giving me secrets to the R.F.S. like that? Heh, heh...looks like you're not what you're cracked up to be."

Sora didn't respond. Instead, she turned around and lowered her head into our hands, seemingly crying into them. Akhlut could see why Sora would be so upset, she'd been bested and was giving up everything just to save her brother. But then the S.T.I.N.G. boss found out that the joke was on HIM. The orb Sora had given him was actually a flash-grenade and she'd set a timer on it before giving it to him. Sora had not been crying into her hands, she had instead lowered her head into them to protect her eyes from the flash.

Cosmo and Ruben had caught on and they closed their eyes too. The bomb detonated, throwing a huge explosion of light around the room and catching Akhlut completely off-guard. He felt as if somebody had punched him in the eyes. He let out a pained scream of agony as he was momentarily blinded. He stumbled away from the crane, clutching his eyes and willing them to focus again. Sora, Cosmo and Ruben kept their eyes closed for a few seconds to make sure the light had died down enough for them to see.

Cosmo risked a peek and was relieved to see the light was fading. While Akhlut was distracted, she ran over to the crane and observed the controls. Thankfully, it had very simplistic controls and was easy to use. There were levers to make the crane arm move up and down and a wheel to turn it. She grabbed the wheel and began to turn the crane, moving Tails away from the water beneath him.

"Hold on Tails, I'm gonna get you down!" she called up to him.

The twin-tailed fox smiled behind his gag. He was used to saving Cosmo but he could appreciate the role reversal for this occasion. It showed that Cosmo was a much stronger and more capable woman than she'd ever been before. But just as Tails was moved away from the water and back over the floor, Akhlut's vision returned to him and he opened his eyes, seeing Cosmo at the controls of his crane. He clenched his teeth angrily.

"GET AWAY FROM THAT!" he bellowed.

He lowered his head, looking as if he was about to charge. But instead, he stayed still while something happened above his head, Huge waves of green energy emitted from the orb on his metal fin and punched into Cosmo, knocking her clean off her feet and away from the crane. Sora and Ruben ran towards the orca but Akhlut turned to face them and fired energy waves at them. Rather than knocking them off their feet, the waves instead made the soon-to-be-wed couple fall down on their knees and clutch their heads in agony. What they were just learning from that attack was the fact Akhlut has psychic powers. The energy waves he fired could knock people

flying or bring them to their knees with a killer headache. It was one of many upgrades he'd received from S.T.I.N.G., a weapon that would make him more powerful than ever before. Akhlut smirked, pleased with his handiwork.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha! I was dying to test this thing and see how it works!" he cried, "It's beautiful! Oh I better thank S.T.I.N.G. for giving me this weapon! I've never felt so powerful in all my life!"

He cackled maniacally as he kept up his attack. Ruben and Sora clutched their heads, willing the pain to go away. It was as if somebody was squeezing their brains from the inside like a sponge in a bath. If it got any worse, they'd pass out. Akhlut advanced on the two as if hoping him getting closer to them would make the pain worse. But the orca didn't realize he had made a big mistake. He was so focused on only Ruben and Sora, leaving Cosmo free to do what she wanted while she was below his attention. She picked herself up and drew out her throwing weapon. She deployed the blades and threw it at the chain holding Tails aloft. Her weapon cut straight through the chain, dropping the fox down onto the floor. He was relieved to be down on the ground and able to lower his arms at last. He peeled the tape off of his mouth and rubbed his throbbing wrists tenderly for a moment, trying to ease some feeling back into his hands and wrists. Cosmo ran over to him and hugged him, hoping he was alright. Tails returned the gesture.

"Man that feels better! Thanks for the save Cosmo." he said appreciatively.

"My pleasure. You've saved my life plenty of times before so I felt it was my turn to return the favour." Cosmo replied, kissing his cheek.

Akhlut didn't seem to have noticed his captive was now free, still throwing psychic waves at Ruben and Sora. That was fortunate, now the fox could get his own back and he wouldn't be prepared for it.

Grinning to himself, he spun his tails around and took flight. The gadgeteer flew straight towards Akhlut and swung his legs upwards,

walloping him in the head and throwing him onto his side. The killer whale was so startled that he didn't even know what had hit him. Ruben and Sora both sighed with relief, glad that the psychic torture was over. They eased some feeling back into their heads before standing up. Tails approached them and hugged them both.

"Hey you two." he said, "Thanks for the save back there Sora. You really got us outta that one!"

"You're welcome little brother!" Sora exclaimed happily, "And thank you for stopping Akhlut from giving me and Ruben a migraine! That was the worst thing I've ever felt in my life!"

"I don't ever wanna feel that again..." Ruben muttered, still massaging his scalp.

"Seems he has psychic powers. We'll have to stay on our toes if we don't wanna lose to him." Tails noted, "Use evasive tactics, it'll make us harder for him to hit us. We could possibly wear him down and then take him out. And then he can join Ramirez in a prison cell."

"And hopefully Lyra will too." Ruben added, "We got a call from Nicole earlier. She's told us that somebody mind-controlled the Soleanna Royal Family into attacking Sally, Zoe and Sonar back at the hospital. Sonar worked out that the ability is something that leeches can do, thus meaning it was Lyra who did it."

"I know..." Tails sighed, "Lyra mind-controlled me into telling Akhlut what Sora got Ramirez to tell us. She's on her way to the MPD to break Ramirez out. At first I wondered what had happened but I managed to recall it shortly afterwards."

"Good thing I told Nicole to pass the message onto EVERYBODY then." Sora muttered, "Lyra will be walking right into a trap now." she added, smirking.

"And S.T.I.N.G. thinks that they're a step ahead of us." the twin-tailed fox sneered.

All banter would have to wait for later. Akhlut suddenly picked himself up, rubbing his head and groaning in annoyance. He didn't really sound hurt, he sounded more irritated than anything. This was just one big inconvenience as far as he was concerned. He turned around and clenched his sharp teeth in rage. If anger had a face, it would look like Akhlut.

"You've made a fool out of me and now my hostage is free!" the killer whale snarled, "If I wasn't meant to keep you brats alive, I'd snap all your necks! As is, I'll have to put you all to sleep so I can deliver you to S.T.I.N.G. and let them do what they please to you!"

"You'll have to catch us first Akhlut!" Tails retorted, "In honour of our great King Sonic, we'll see you arrested and incarcerated when this is over!"

"I'll see you all unconscious and shipped away before you can slap the cuffs on me runt..." Akhlut growled.

He charged towards Tails and his team like an enraged Triceratops. He even let out a roar of pure rage that made him sound completely inhuman. Tails, Cosmo, Sora and Ruben all jumped to the side as Akhlut thundered past. He skidded to a halt and turned around, making sure he was facing his enemies so he could fire another psychic wave at them. The huge green waves leapt out of his metal fin and slammed into the four, knocking them flying across the room and into the wall. They all groaned, wondering what had hit them for a moment. Growling savagely, Akhlut allowed rage and fury to drive him on as he charged towards his opponents once again. The Mobians only just had time to pick themselves up before Akhlut slammed into them, squashing them against the wall and knocking the wind out of them. As they fell, Akhlut picked Cosmo up and squeezed her tightly with his huge hands. The Seedrian cried out, trying to keep the air from escaping her lungs.

"S.T.I.N.G. want you all alive for their grand vision but that doesn't mean I can't break a few bones first!" Akhlut snarled, "You've

humiliated me enough times already freak! I'll see to it that you can't walk until it is time for S.T.I.N.G.'s vision to come true!"

He tightened his grip, making Cosmo cry out strangled gasps as the killer whale's grip tightened. She couldn't possibly break free, he was much too strong for her. But the Seedrian knew how to make him release her. Gritting her teeth, she swung her head forwards and slammed it into Akhlut's rostrum. To him, it was the equivalent of being head-butted in the nose. Pain exploded in his face as the alien plant's head sharply connected with his rostrum and he let Cosmo go, clutching his face in agony. He let out a pained scream that echoed around the room. While he was distracted, Cosmo also roundhouse kicked him in the legs, tripping him up and bringing him down onto his back. Tails watched, utterly impressed with how well his fiancée was fighting. She had trained well over the years she'd been on Mobius and was clearly more potent than she once was, even if she didn't like fighting.

"I'm so glad I'm marrying that woman..." Tails said to himself.

Now Akhlut was down, Ruben and Sora pounced on him and grabbed him by the arms, intending to pin him down so they could leave him vulnerable for attack. But trying to restrain the S.T.I.N.G. boss was like trying to tie down an elephant, near impossible to do when the creature is so strong and powerful that two measly Mobians would barely even slow it down. The orca got back to his feet *with Ruben and Sora clinging onto him* and he swiped his arms, throwing them off and sending them crashing down onto the ground. Cosmo ran towards him, intending to trip him up again but the killer whale was ready for her. He seized her with one hand, held her up off the floor and then punched her in-between the eyes. The punch felt like being hit by a steel girder. Cosmo cried out as she was sent flying into the wall, grunting as she hit it and slumped down onto the floor, clutching her face in agony. Tails cried out for her and turned, gritting his teeth. He didn't usually get angry very easily but right now, he was seeing red, and a lot of it.

"Nobody punches my fiancée like that!" he screamed angrily.

Taking flight, Tails hurled himself at Akhlut. The killer whale saw him coming and was about to fire another round of psychic waves but his opponent was too quick. Tails raised his legs, using his tails to propel him forwards and he began to unleash a rapid torrent of heavy kicks directly at the huge Mobian's face. Akhlut was sent staggering backwards with every kick that slammed into his face, even hitting his still sore rostrum and causing more pain. Tails was throwing his kicks so rapidly that the orca couldn't even block his blows. He stumbled backwards until finally, Tails drew his legs backwards and kangaroo kicked him between the eyes, snapping his head backwards and throwing him off his feet. He landed down heavily onto his back, nearly cracking the floor as he landed. Tails touched down, panting heavily but still smirking triumphantly. That whole onslaught had felt good to him in the sense that he'd managed to beat up the one who tried to use him as a hostage. Cosmo staggered over to Tails while Ruben and Sora came up behind him, impressed with what he'd done.

"That was awesome!" Sora cried, "You sure showed him Tails!"

"Serves him right...for kidnapping me...and punching Cosmo!" the fox declared, still catching his breath.

"I doubt that would have brought him down though..." Ruben said grimly.

Being a martial artist, Ruben was able to guess whether his opponent would be downed or not. And he had a horrible habit of being right most of the time. Akhlut picked himself up, still massaging his face but looking as if he still had plenty of energy left in him. He didn't even look fatigued. He smirked at his opponents, indicating the whole thing was a game to him.

"Valiant effort there little fox." he crowed, "But you forget. I am a warrior, the chief of a clan of warriors in fact! I am physically perfect! You'll take forever to wear me down! Throw as much assaults as you can Tails, you'll not take me down in a hurry!"

"I hate to say this but I agree on that." Tails muttered, "You do have the physique of somebody who can go on for a while without getting tired. But you're also talking to the same people who took down gods. GODS! You're nothing compared to what we've handled!"

"We're still gonna bring you down!" Ruben declared, "You can go on for a long time? So can we!"

"Then let's see who falls first." Akhlut purred, cracking his knuckles.

Flexing his huge muscles, Akhlut roared and sprang into the air. Despite his size, he jumped surprisingly high up, almost as if fired from a catapult! Tails and his team cried out in surprise, unable to believe Akhlut could jump so high, and they scrambled for cover before he could crash down on any of them. They dived to the side as Akhlut slammed down on the floor, nearly smashing straight through it. Bellowing with laughter, Akhlut picked himself up, spun around on his heels and fired another round of psychic waves at his four opponents. He managed to hit the whole team and knock them off their feet, sending them sliding across the floor. Ruben nearly fell into the ice cold pool Tails had been hung over earlier but he just managed to save himself from falling in by frantically scrabbling with his hands. This slowed him down enough to stop himself from falling in.

Although stopping near the water had given Ruben an idea. Grinning to himself, the water panther got to his feet and held his hands out. As he had matured over the years, his water powers had become much, much stronger than before. He was not only able to squirt water, but also able to control it and bend it to his whims and will. Right now, he was making the water in the pool slowly rise up and up as if performing some incredible magic trick. He knew the water wouldn't stop Akhlut since orcas were used to swimming in freezing temperatures but it would slow him down for a bit. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Akhlut was throwing a punch at Sora. The vixen had managed to dodge and threw an upwards kick to Akhlut's face that managed to knock him back a little. Now was his chance! Ruben swung his arms forward and made the water leap out of the

pool. It rushed towards the killer whale and hit him, knocking him off his feet and slamming him into the wall. The impact was so hard that he ended up cracking it. He shivered for a moment as the cold bit at his skin. Sora turned and gave a thumbs up to her fiancé. His incredible water power was one of the many reasons she loved him.

"Good one Ruben!" she called out to him.

"Thank you my love." Ruben replied, bowing politely.

Akhlut picked himself up, dripping wet and full of anger. He supposed it had been foolish of him to keep Tails captive in a room that contained water. He should've known Ruben would be able to weaponize it like so! But he wasn't going to let a torrent of water slow him down, not when he was so close to getting more Royal Fighters bugged for Scorn. He lowered his head and charged towards the water-panther. Ruben held his hands out and squirted water straight at him. The water jets hit Akhlut and pushed him back but the orca refused to give in. He began digging his heels in and trying as hard as he could to push against the torrent. Ruben could see that Akhlut was not going down so easily but he didn't give up. He kept the huge jets of water going, pushing against his huge opponent in the hopes of winning this sumo match between water panther and killer whale.

He also realized he had an advantage over him too. Because he was using both hands, he could squirt Akhlut in two different directions. He lowered one of his hands, aiming directly at his feet. Water gushed over the S.T.I.N.G. boss's metal booted feet and as it soaked him, the water began to spread all over the floor. This caused it to become slippery so Akhlut ended up falling over flat on his face and being pushed back by the jet of water from Ruben's other hand. The orca cried out as once again, he was slammed against the wall by the attack. He had hit it in the same spot he'd hit it the first time, causing the cracks to get even bigger. That made Ruben hesitate for a moment, stopping his water jets. The last thing he needed was the room to collapse down on top of everybody so it would be wise to try not to crack the walls any further.

Akhlut didn't even seem to notice as he stood up again and fired a psychic wave from his metal fin into Ruben. The waves hit the water panther and went him flying backwards. He would've fallen into the icy pool behind him had Tails not soared forwards and caught him just in time. He carried his friend away from the pool and over Akhlut, the killer whale glaring up at the two with clenched teeth. He fired another round of psychic waves but Tails was ready for him. He flew out of the way, leaving the killer whale to instead hit the ceiling. The waves slammed into the ceiling, almost like multiple hammer blows only harder, and the ceiling began to crack under protest. Akhlut realized what was happening and quickly switched off his psychic emitter. He didn't want to bring the roof down on his head, not when it could easily kill him. He looked around for Tails and Ruben, only to cry out in surprise as his legs were suddenly kicked out from underneath him, bringing him crashing down heavily onto the floor. Cosmo and Sora had crept up behind the orca and kicked him in both legs. Akhlut was so stunned he didn't even know what had hit him.

Sora grabbed an orb from her belt and prepared to throw it at the killer whale. It was the orb that contained a huge dose of mega muck, the stickiest substance on Mobius. Just a puddle of the stuff was enough to bring Sonic himself grinding to a halt. Akhlut would be stuck fast once she used it and then they could arrest him at last. But unfortunately, the killer whale wasn't down for long and recovered quicker than Sora had hoped. He sat up and socked the vixen in the face, knocking her back and causing her to drop her orb. It smashed open, spilling the mega muck everywhere. Now everybody would have to be careful not to step on it or they would be cemented to the floor. Sora picked herself up, looking more angry than hurt as she rubbed her face.

"Hey, do you know how hard it is to find this stuff?!" she ranted, "It doesn't come easy you know!"

"I don't care." Akhlut snorted, standing up and lowering his head.

Sora reacted incredibly quickly, knowing what her opponent was about to do. She grabbed an orb from her belt and threw it at Akhlut's forehead. It didn't contain anything, it was just an orb she used as a throwing weapon. It slammed into the whale's head and made him cry out as pain flared through his skull. It felt like being punched really hard to him. Now he was distracted, Cosmo was quick to attack him again, drawing her leg back and driving it hard into the small of the huge Mobian's back. Akhlut staggered, bending back in pain and just before he could recover, Cosmo drew out her flower blade and threw it at his shoulder, slicing a neat cut into the flesh and making the S.T.I.N.G. boss bellow in response as he felt the sharp blades slice his shoulder. The cut was large and began to bleed, the cold atmosphere making it sting like mad. Akhlut was used to pain thanks to his status as a warrior but even he couldn't fight off the pain in his shoulder. He was unprepared as Tails came hurtling towards him from above like a falcon in a dive-bomb and the fox's feet slammed into the side of his head, throwing him down onto his side. Gritting his teeth, Akhlut lay down on the floor for a moment as he tried to ease the pain from his injuries.

He sat up, glaring at his opponents as they stood over him triumphantly. They were clearly the winners of this fight. Akhlut couldn't keep up with all four of them at once and they were beginning to overpower him. He couldn't keep the fight up any longer. Tails folded his arms, happy to see that his team had won.

"Looks like you fall first." he sneered, "You really were foolish to think you could take us all on and win. Now you're going in a cell for as long as you live for your crimes against our king!"

But before he could make the arrest, his face suddenly curled up in anguish and he bent over forward, clutching his stomach as the bug he'd unknowingly been fitted with suddenly moved. It had chosen the best possible time to do so for Akhlut. Tails wasn't even sure what was happening and why his stomach was hurting. All he knew was that it had come out of nowhere and it hurt so much he could barely stand. Grinning wickedly, Akhlut sprang up onto his feet and

backhanded him down onto the floor. Tails cried out as he landed and the killer whale ran towards the pool. Sora, Ruben and Cosmo chased after him but the killer whale spun around and fired psychic beams at the cracked ceiling. The waves hit the already weakened spot and as they bombarded it, the ceiling began to crack even more until chunks of it began to break away and crash down on the floor. Akhlut laughed as the three Royal Fighters quickly darted backwards to avoid being crushed.

"Hope you have enough time to escape my lair before it falls down on you!" he crowed, jumping into the water and swimming down.

The icy cold water wasn't just a method of execution, it was also a secret escape route for Akhlut and only he would be able to use it since any other Mobian would've frozen to death before they'd even noticed the escape route. He swam up to a barred circular hole at the bottom of the floor and grabbed one of the bars. The bars were programmed to open up once his hand was closed around it and they did so now. He swam down the hole and follow the L shape tunnel that would take him into another room and then he would flee Orca Island and run off back to S.T.I.N.G. Better to do battle another day then end up behind bars he thought.

Back in the Ice Dungeon, the ceiling was breaking apart. The room shuddered as huge chunks of ceiling collapsed down onto the floor with a bone-shaking crash that made the floor crack. It was like being trapped in the world's worst hail storm, only the hailstones were big enough to flatten people. Tails picked himself up, massaging his belly as he saw the new danger he and his friends were in. He cried out and rolled aside as one huge chunk of the broken ceiling fell down and missed him my centimetres. He got up to his feet and called out.

"Everybody outta here, NOW!"

Nobody so much as hesitated. With Tails up ahead, Cosmo, Sora and Ruben all ran off after him, avoiding the falling debris as the ceiling began to collapse. From the way things were playing it, it

looked as if the entire room was going to collapse in on itself. A huge chunk of debris hurtled down towards Sora, forcing her to dive to the side to avoid being crushed. But due to how frantic she had been to get out of the way, she hadn't realized she had jumped straight towards the puddle of mega muck that was still spread out on the floor from earlier. She landed straight in the mega muck, getting stuck fast before she could even draw breath. Crying out in horror, Sora tried to move but the stick substance held on tightly, refusing to let her go. Sora felt like she'd been glued to the floor as she pulled on her limbs, trying to get free. Another chunk of ceiling crashed down behind her, making her flinch instinctively. If she couldn't get free then she'd be crushed!

"Somebody help! I'm stuck! Help me!" she cried out.

Ruben turned around quickly, gasping in horror at the sight of his fiancee trapped and he ran over to her. Tails and Cosmo saw that Sora was in danger and ran after Ruben to help. Ruben grabbed Sora's arms and pulled on them, trying to wrench them free from the mega muck. Tails and Cosmo held onto her sides and tugged with their friend, making sure not to stand in the mega muck itself. They strained, gritting their teeth and using all the strength they each had to try and pull the vixen free. Ruben could already feel his face going red from the effort.

"We'll get you out...Sora!" he grunted, tugging again to try and wrench her free.

"Pull everybody, pull!" Tails cried.

The rare substance refused to let go, tugging back hard on Sora as the trio tried to pull her free. But even mega muck had its limits and couldn't hold onto anything forever. Tails and Cosmo dug their heels in, pulling harder on their friend and feeling the vixen slowly starting to pull free. Sora was beginning to rise up slightly, huge strands of mega muck clinging onto her limbs as she was pulled. Sweat beaded down the three Mobians's faces as they continued to pull. The ceiling was still falling down, heavy chunks slamming down onto

the floor and cracking it. The cracks spread to the walls and huge slabs of the walls began to fall away too, smashing into pieces with an ear-splitting slam. The noise just made the trio pull on Sora harder. They had to get free before the ceiling collapsed completely and crushed them all! One huge slab broke away and fell down towards the Royal Fighters. Ruben saw it and aimed a hand, squirting water at the debris and sending it hurling away. Then he closed his hand around Sora's arm again and gave one more mighty yank. Tails and Cosmo leaned forwards a little and then sharply threw themselves back to put in all the strength they had into their pull. At last, Sora came free, wrenching out of the mega muck as a result of the final pull and falling straight on top of her friends, knocking them down onto the floor. Now she was free, the team got up to their feet and ran for their lives. Just as they ran, a piece of the ceiling crashed down directly on top of the mega muck spot. Had they been any slower, the four Mobians would've been squashed flat under the debris.

As soon as the team had run out of the Ice Dungeon, they collapsed down onto the floor in a heap, panting and gasping as they tried to catch their breath. The sound of the falling debris crashing down onto the floor could still be heard but nobody paid any attention to the sound. All they cared about was the fact they were all safe and alive. Sora looked up at Ruben and smiled at him graciously. She hugged him in gratitude.

"Oh Ruben, thank you so much!" she gasped, "I really thought that was the end of me! You really saved me back there! Same to you Tails and Cosmo!"

"Aww, you're welcome precious." Ruben said kindly, running his hand through Sora's hair, "We haven't gotten married yet so I couldn't possibly let you die."

"You're one of the most valuable members of the Royal Fighters, a great sister to me and a great friend to everybody else! We had to save you Sora!" Tails added.

"I'm glad we're all safe now." Cosmo puffed, wiping sweat off her forehead, "I really was worried that we were goners, all of us."

"We very nearly were." Tails sighed, "And all because I got captured by Akhlut. I'm so sorry that I botched the mission guys..." he added, looking away from them in shame.

Cosmo looked over at her fiance sadly and put an arm around him comfortingly.

"Oh please don't put yourself down dearest." she said softly, "It wasn't your fault you got caught. We weren't to know that Akhlut was expecting us and was lying in wait. No matter how smart we maybe, we can't be prepared for everything."

"Cosmo's right my friend, nobody can prepare for every outcome possible." Ruben added, "You're not to blame for our failure Tails and don't you think for a minute that you are."

Tails looked back at his friends, not sure if he fully accepted what they said but nevertheless, feeling a little better. He put his arm around Cosmo and smiled sadly at her.

"I still feel it was my fault we failed, but you're all right about one thing." he said, "We can't be prepared for everything. But we can at least try to prepare for as many outcomes as we can. We'll be a step ahead of S.T.I.N.G. if we all put our heads into it and not let ourselves be fooled again."

"I totally agree little brother." Sora nodded, "Now we know how much S.T.I.N.G. means business, we'll not be foolish enough to underestimate them again and not walk into their traps so easily. Next time we meet Akhlut, we'll be more cautious and more smart in our arrest."

"Great idea sis." the twin-tailed gadgeteer said approvingly, "For now, we best get back to the others and tell them Akhlut got away,

and also see if we can work out why I had a sudden stomach ache for no reason..." he added, placing a hand on his belly.

"Yes, that was really weird and out of nowhere." Cosmo acknowledged, "For Zoe, it made sense since she was heavily stressed but you were perfectly fine before it happened. There must be something S.T.I.N.G. did to you to make that happen."

"I know, hence why I'm gonna let Nicole run a diagnostic scan on me." Tails murmured, "Sora, when we get back to the hospital, I think you should do what you threatened to do to Ramirez to teach him a lesson for withholding vital information such as Lyra's power."

"Oh I will!" the spy growled, "I'll have him locked up somewhere that can't be found on any map and not let him out until he's fully willing to tell us EVERYTHING we wanna know, even the tiniest of details! Plus he's too valuable to give back to S.T.I.N.G. so we have to make sure he's secure anyway. I'll make the arrangements once we get back."

"That's what I like to hear." Tails said approvingly, "In the meantime, I hope Sonic's woken up from his coma about now."

"And that Lyra's been caught or at least stopped..." Cosmo added, noting that they still had Lyra the Leech to worry about.

Tails nodded. As he and the others picked themselves up and headed on out of the base, they began to wonder how things were going back in New Mobotropolis and if Lyra's mission to rescue Ramirez had been successful or not...

Well, that's a story for another chapter!

Tune in next time as we find out what Lyra's been up to while our heroes have been fighting Akhlut! Don't miss it! ;)

Double Weddings: Chapter 7

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 7: Lyra's Mission

"I swear these S.T.I.N.G. guys keep pulling out surprise after surprise." Mandy the Mouse muttered as she slipped on her trademark steel knuckle attachments, "We drop off Ramirez the Chameleon and just as we're about to leave, we get a call to be on the look out for a leech named Lyra! A leech with mind control powers no less!"

"S.T.I.N.G. do indeed seem to be full of surprises dear." Wilson the Dog agreed, nodding as he drew out his trademark twin-bladed weapon, "I still can't forget about the time they burnt down Castle Acorn shortly after Ramirez broke Fang out of prison. None of us could've seen that coming!"

Mandy nodded grimly, wishing she could forget about that terrible day as much as everybody else. She could even see the remains of Castle Acorn, a charred, blackened reminder of S.T.I.N.G.'s first ever attack that had ended in despair for the people of New Mobotropolis. She could only wish that she had been there at the time, thinking that she probably could've stopped Ramirez and Fang before they could set the castle alight.

After being sent to escort Ramirez the Chameleon to the New Mobotropolis Detention Centre, Wilson and Mandy had received Nicole's warning about Lyra and recommended to the two that they keep a look out for Lyra the Leech given there was a huge possibility that she could try and break Ramirez out of prison. The married couple had been all too happy to accept this task, knowing full well how dangerous mind control could be. If Lyra got hold of any of the guards, she could use them to release the chameleon. Ramirez was

too valuable a prisoner for them to lose so the Royal Fighters were determined to make sure she never got close.

Wilson and Mandy weren't alone though. There were the guards of the NMDC, all of them real guards and not S.T.I.N.G. agents in disguise, and the couple had brought their kids along with them too. They had a son named Daniel, who was an orange dog like Wilson, and a daughter named Rachel, who was a purple mouse like Mandy. Rachel looked very keen to get into some action whereas Daniel looked nervous. He had his hands behind his back and his ears drooped back in worry.

"I don't like this..." he mumbled, "What if Lyra mind-controls us? I don't wanna know what it feels like to be mind-controlled!" he fretted.

"Oh calm down Danny, that bitch won't get us!" Rachel scoffed, "Our parents are two of the greatest Royal Fighters ever! We'll be OK."

"I'm glad you're optimistic Rachel but don't get too full of yourself." Mandy warned, "Me and your father may well be great fighters, but that doesn't necessarily mean we're going to win. We don't know what this "Lyra" person is like. For all we know, she could be a ridiculously good fighter who can hold her own against ten people at once. Believe me, you've heard the stories me and your father told you about how we've taken on guys who can hold their own against all of us at once..."

Rachel's mouth curled down as she thought back to the stories she'd heard about the Royal Fighters trying to take down guys like Imperator Ix, Dr. Finitevus, Marik the Martian and others. They'd been able to hold their own against the whole team, something that had fascinated the tomboy mouse given she never thought it possible for one person to take down large numbers single-handedly. She supposed that her mother was right and that she couldn't get too confident. Too much confidence could get you killed, a lesson that she had been taught by her parents at a young age.

"Good point mom." she said, "I'll try not to get too into the fight then. Though I am seriously looking forward to throwing some punches!" she cried out, punching the air triumphantly.

"Just don't hurt your knuckles too much Rachel!" Daniel piped anxiously.

Wilson stood behind his son and patted his shoulder softly, smiling at him. How much the young canine reminded him of himself when he was younger. Always a bit of a skitterbug but nevertheless trying to be brave when the situation called for it. He often wondered when Daniel's moment of valour would come. Maybe it would come now if Lyra should choose to show up at this point.

"Come on Daniel, you don't need to worry so much." the dog said softly, "You'll be fine, Rachel will be fine and me and your mother will be fine too. You can trust me on that."

Daniel looked up at his dad, already feeling much calmer and more collected. There was something about his father that always seemed to ease his nerves. He supposed Wilson was just a very positive influence on him. Smiling, he hugged Wilson graciously.

"I do trust you dad." he said, "I always do."

"That's my boy." Wilson replied happily.

As the two dogs hugged, Mandy and Rachel had turned around to chat to one of the guards. The lead guard was a huge, muscular bulldog who had incisors a lot larger than what would be considered normal for a Mobian of his species. He looked gruff and always read for a fight thanks to his serious face and thickset appearance. But when he wasn't in a fight or on patrol, he was known to be very gentle and kind towards people he was chatting to or helping.

"So Sgt. Spike, you say you've checked your men several times over to make sure that none of them are really S.T.I.N.G. agents in disguise?" Mandy asked.

"Absolutely madam." Sgt. Spike replied, "I even checked them for holographic disguise emitters and read their profiles several times over. I can't find anything that would suggest that any of my men or women would be willing to double cross our royal highness and work for Eggman worshipers. Speaking of the king, how is he? I heard he was attacked during the big wedding in Soleanna."

"He's fine, Sonar the Hedgehog healed him from what I've heard." Mandy replied, sounding relieved to be saying those words, "I wonder if he's awake right now. When me and my husband and children can return home, we can see if King Sonic's awake now."

"I was proper pissed off when that happened." Rachel growled venomously, "I was so looking forward to seeing Tails, Cosmo, Sora and Ruben getting married. Even if I did have to wear that stupid dress..." she added bitterly, "I swear I could just punch the bastard who shot the king like that!" she clenched her fist in rage as if emphasizing her point.

Sgt. Spike recoiled, surprised at just how angry Mandy's daughter could get. He knew children could get emotional but he hadn't often experienced it for himself. Mandy smiled sheepishly at the police sergeant and turned to her daughter.

"Rachel honey, please calm down." the purple mouse said gently, "I've warned you about getting worked up like that."

"It's hard for me NOT to get worked up over something so horrible mom!" Rachel retorted, "Some asshole with a gun shot the king! The same king who saved the world several times over as you said! How can I not be mad about it?!"

Mandy supposed that her daughter did have a good point. Deep inside, she was angry that somebody had attack King Sonic too. She was very loyal to Sonic, even going so far as to risk her own life for him. He was one of her best friends, having been so since the day he'd saved her and Wilson from being roboticized during Eggman's first attack. He'd inspired her to be a hero herself. She wanted to

avenge Sonic as much as Rachel did. But she knew from experience that temper didn't get anybody anywhere and she wanted her daughter to learn this too, for her own safety. Mandy couldn't bear to think what would happen if Rachel's anger got her into serious danger someday.

She was about to reply to Rachel's ranting but before a single word could leave her mouth, one of the guards suddenly cried out in alarm, gesticulating wildly. He'd been keeping a watch out the whole time, sweeping his eyes out over the city and he had seen something that sent all alarm bells ringing.

"Spike, Royal Fighters, there's an orange leech coming towards us!" he cried out.

"Is it a female?" Sgt. Spike asked.

"Very much so! She's wearing a dress that looks like it was made by Eggman himself!" the guard cried out, "It might be this Lyra woman we're supposed to look out for!"

That single sentence was enough to get everybody on high alert. All senses were heightened and weapons were primed as the guards and the Royal Fighters prepared for the inevitable fight that was going to happen. Rachel stood by Daniel protectively while Wilson and Mandy stood together, their fists clenched and their bodies tense. It had been years since they had had to prepare for something like this. The 17 years that had passed since Enerjak's destruction had given them little need to be combat ready. Time would tell now if they still had it.

"This is it kids, get ready for anything." Mandy said grimly.

"Finally, some action! I'm pumped!" Rachel exclaimed eagerly.

"Did you ever feel this nervous before a fight began mom and dad?" Daniel asked uneasily.

All eyes were fixed ahead as the jolly, childish, chipper Lyra the Leech began prancing her way towards the NMDC. She looked like a happy schoolgirl dancing merrily in the playground, completely oblivious to what was going on up ahead. She even sounded like she was singing to herself. That made Mandy lower her fists for a moment. This crazy girl couldn't possibly be Lyra the Leech, an actual S.T.I.N.G. agent with mind control powers could she? Looking at her right now, Mandy felt as if they were getting ready to fight a kid. But the mouse knew better than to lower her guard. Experience had taught her to treat even the most harmless looking villains with utmost seriousness. Rachel however didn't seem to share her mother's training for she dropped her battle-ready stance and broke into a mocking grin.

"That's her?" she whispered, smirking, "Look at her! Her head's up in the clouds! She's prancing about like a total idiot! She can't possibly be a threat!"

"She may not look that way but we can't underestimate her Rachel." Wilson whispered back, "Don't let your guard down."

Rachel just shrugged casually.

"What's she gonna do? Sing merrily?" she sneered.

"I hope so, that'll make her less scary." Daniel replied, earning a rolling of the eyes from his hot-headed sister.

Lyra approached the NMDC, opening her eyes and gasping in surprise. She hadn't expected many reinforcements to deal with, maybe only a handful of guards at best. Instead, there was a whole platoon there and four Royal Fighters, two of them veterans and the other two trainees! The leech didn't seem bothered though. She just continued to smile innocently and waved as if she was greeting an old friend.

"Hi there ossifers!" she cried, "Lovely day isn't it?"

"It's "officers" actually." Sgt. Spike muttered, "Are you Lyra the Leech by any chance?"

"What does it matter to you if I am?" Lyra snapped, "It's none of your beeswax! Now if you'll excuse me, there's somebody I'd like to meet in that prison behind you. Would be so kind as to let me in so I can say hi to him?"

"I don't think we'll allow that..." Mandy growled, her voice like ice, "You see, we had a tip-off that a leech with mind-control powers got the Soleanna Royals to try and kill our king. And given your outfit has a very Eggman-like appearance to it, we believe you're the S.T.I.N.G. agent known as Lyra the Leech. You better not deny it because all that'll do is make your punishment even worse."

Lyra squealed in shock. The Royal Fighters had been tipped-off she had mind-control powers?! How was that possible?! She remembered how she lost contact with the Duke, Duchess and Princess back in the hospital when they'd been subdued. Could it be possible that Sonar, Sally and Zoe had worked out how they'd been turned evil and warned everybody about her? Talk about throwing a spanner into the works! Lyra was meant to rescue Ramirez but now it seemed she had to fight her way through a protective wall that was clearly determined not to let her in. Why couldn't S.T.I.N.G. have it easy like Scorn and his main four henchmen did the other month?! Regardless, Lyra wasn't going down without a fight. She slowly balled her fists and her sweet smile narrowed into a more sinister smile that didn't look right on a ditzy Mobian like herself.

"Well, well...looks like you dumbies had a smarty moment and figured it out." she crooned, "What can I say? Even S.T.I.N.G. can't keep its secrets forever! Yes, I'm Lyra the Leech and I am a S.T.I.N.G. agent! I've been sent here to rescue Ramirez the Chameleon and if you don't want me to drain your blood at all, I'll be happy if you all get out of my way and just let me take Ramirez home."

"Fat chance of that!" Wilson snapped, "You're going in a prison cell with Ramirez when we're through with you!"

"Jinkies, and I thought you was meant to be a wuss Wilson the Dog!" the artificially created Mobian jeered, "Never mind, it'll be more fun wounding your pride when I kick your ass! Eee, hee, hee, hee, hee, hee!"

She then suddenly sprang up into the air like a giant frog and hurled down towards Wilson and Mandy, her mouth open wide and her fangs bared. Mandy reacted first, throwing a terrific punch into Lyra's mouth. She still used the steel knuckle attachments Tails had built for her years ago. The same kind of weapons that enhanced her punches and made them more powerful than they already were. To Lyra, it felt more like she'd been punched by an elephant than a mouse. She hurtled backwards as the enhanced punch sent her flying.

"OW, YOU'RE NOT NICE! I'M GONNA BITE YOU FOR THAAAAAAAAT!" she squealed angrily as she crashed down onto the ground like a falling stone.

The bloodsucking freak picked herself up, barely fazed by the impact of her landing. Even the punch to her face didn't seem to have hurt her that much, though there was a trickle of blood curling down the corner of her mouth. She licked it away and bent down in a charging stance. Her dreadlocks began waving around menacingly, the vicious stingers ready to attack. Wilson stepped forward, spinning his weapon around like a giant fan in front of him. This was a defensive move that was meant to intimidate the opponent and tempt them to stay back, leaving them more vulnerable for attack. Nobody would be foolish enough to get close to a twin bladed weapon spinning around like so.

"I have a feeling those stingers are how she controls people." the dog theorized, "Make sure they don't get you everyone!"

"Will do Wilson." Sgt. Spike said gruffly, his wrinkled features narrowing down as he loaded his pistol and aimed it at the leech, "Men, shout to wound! If we have to though, you may shoot to kill but only when absolutely necessary!" he barked.

His men nodded and drew out their guns. They began shooting at Lyra, hoping to disable her so she'd be unable to resist as they tossed her into a cell. But the leech moved around at surprising speed, weaving around each blast that came towards her. She was like a weasel sliding through the tightest of spaces. That made Wilson and Mandy hesitate briefly. They had to be VERY careful now if this girl was able to move as fast as she was now! Sgt. Spike took aim at Lyra's legs and fired. The shot missed by a mile as the leech threw herself aside.

"Bingity-bangity-bingity,bongity! Shoot at me, you'll never get me, no matter how much you bingity-bangity-bingity-bongity!" she taunted.

She then jumped towards Sgt. Spike and dropped kicked the bulldog in the face, knocking him down and sending his gun sprawling. His men aimed at the leech but Lyra then hauled the huge officer off the ground, showing a startling amount of strength, and threw her straight at the officers. They were knocked down like skittles in a bowling alley as their huge sergeant bowled them over.

"Talk about a strike!" Lyra squealed happily, "Man, I'm good at this fighting thing, and I've never been in a fight before outside of training matches with mommy and daddy!"

But the leech should've known that it wasn't wise to allow yourself to get distracted in battle. Scorn had warned her about this important piece of advice several times in training sessions and yet Lyra still hadn't quite grasped it. She'd only just realized that she was getting distracted by squealing excitedly as Wilson suddenly ran in and kicked her in the legs. The childish Mobian cried out as she was suddenly brought down onto her side, grunting as she felt her legs. If there was one thing that really riled her, it was people getting the drop on her. She stood back up, only to be backhanded across the

face by Wilson and as she careened to one side, the dog drew his leg back and drove it straight into his opponents face. Lyra winced and stumbled backwards, rubbing her face better. She gritted her teeth in rage, her pupils seeming to get smaller as anger took over her.

"Hey, it's rude to kick people in the face ya jerk!" Lyra screeched angrily.

"It's also rude to try and attack people and break criminals out of prison but you're doing it anyway." Wilson retorted, spinning his weapon around, "You can fight us all you like, you're not getting anywhere near Ramirez!"

"True, but maybe I can persuade some people to help me with that..." the leech purred confidently.

Before Wilson had any idea on what Lyra was talking about, she suddenly turned around and leapt straight onto a policeman. The policeman screamed in terror and tried to fight Lyra off as the leech's dreadlocks waved around eagerly. They then stung the officer and injected her venom into the unfortunate man's bloodstream. His face went pale and his eyes became grey as Lyra's control was asserted over him. Wilson and Mandy gasped in horror whereas Rachel cringed in disgust and Daniel hid his face behind his hands. Now they knew how the power worked and what it was like to watch it. The policeman stood still, looking vacant as Lyra rubbed her hands eagerly.

"Now then officer whatever-the-fuck-your-name-is, shoot them all! But no killing, daddy doesn't want any Mobians dead unless it's Sonic the Hedgehog! Shoot to wound like flabby-mouth said earlier." she ordered.

The controlled officer obeyed, raising his pistol and shooting at the Royal Fighters and his comrades. Everybody was forced to dodge as the sizzling laser blasts came searing through the air towards them. One of the guards ran to one side, but in doing so, inadvertently put

himself closer to Lyra. Seizing her chance, the leech grabbed the officer and injected him too. Now she had two policemen working for her. The officer's face went pale and his eyes went grey as Lyra's venom took control of him. The leech than commanded him to start shooting at the others, forcing the heroes to spread out to make it harder for the two controlled officers to hit them. One hail of lasers was bad, two hails of lasers was even worse. Mandy threw herself down on the ground just as the second officer shot at her. The lasers whooshed over her, missing her by inches. Wilson threw his bladed weapon at the two officers, forcing them to stop shooting and dive for cover to avoid being cut by the deadly blades. The weapon boomeranged back around and returned to Wilson's hand, the canine hero catching it with expert accuracy.

"This is bad! If Lyra controls anybody else, our protective forces could well end up getting smaller until we're overwhelmed!" he fretted.

"Which is why we're gonna keep our distance until there's an opportune moment to get in closer to her." Mandy decided, "Everybody, don't get close to Lyra and don't let her get close to you!" she shouted, "Use evasive tactics and don't get closer until there's a blind spot we can exploit on her!"

Sgt. Spike nodded, accepting the plan without so much as a single thought of hesitation. He did not want to end up controlled himself. Raising his pistol, he began shooting at Lyra. She was the biggest threat and had to be taken down more than anybody. Lyra cartwheeled away from the shots, laughing like a hyena. This whole fight wasn't a fight to her, it was just one big game. And one she was enjoying VERY much. The two police officers under her control aimed at Sgt. Spike and opened fire on him. The muscular canine was forced to retreat to avoid being hit, running aside as a volley of laser blasts soared towards him.

Lyra was still cartwheeling around, heading straight towards the Royal Fighters themselves. If she could mind-control them, the guards would have no chance. Rachel saw the leech approaching

and ran towards her. Mandy cried out, worried that the mouse was putting herself in danger, but Rachel ignored her. She drew her arm back and launched a powerful punch straight at the leech just as she broke out of her cartwheel. But showing a surprising amount of agility, Lyra rose up just as the punch came close to her and used a hand to shove it aside, causing Rachel to miss. The teen-rodent cried out as she stumbled forward and fell onto her face. Lyra advanced towards her, her dreadlocks wriggling like worms on each side of her head.

"You're a cutie pie." she purred gleefully, "You'll make a wonderful dolly for me little girl. Hee, hee, hee! I can just imagine how cute you'll look in a dress! I'll get rid of those ugly, boyish, leather clothes you wear and make you look gorgeous my little dolly!"

"Dolly...you want to make me...a dolly?!" Rachel snarled viciously, her teeth gritted and her eyes wild with fury.

She sprang back up onto her feet and socked Lyra in the cheek, moving so fast that the leech hadn't even realized what had happened until she was sent tumbling backwards.

"I. **HATE.** DOLLIES!" the tomboy mouse exploded.

Mandy just smirked, almost feeling sorry for Lyra as she was now bearing the brunt of her daughter's rage. If you didn't want Rachel to punch you, you did not ever try to make her do anything girly. Lyra was learning that, and indeed the hard way. The S.T.I.N.G. agent grunted and cried out as Rachel began to whale on her as heavily and as violently as she possibly could. Every punch she landed felt like being bombarded by a shower of rocks to Lyra. She hadn't expected the teen to be this strong or throw punches that heavy.

"YOU WANT A DOLLY?! HERE'S YOUR DOLLY YOU BITCH! HOW DO YOU LIKE IT?! DO YOU WANT IT NOW?! HUH?! **DO YA?!** " Rachel screamed.

Just as she threw another punch at the leech, Lyra suddenly reached up and blocked the punch with her arm. Her face contorted with anger, though the huge bruises she now had made it harder for her to look threatening than before. She closed her hand around Rachel's wrist and twisted her arm, making her cry out in pain.

"You're no fun. You're too violent and shouty. Mommy will have to discipline you very badly you bad, bad dolly!" she growled, raising a dreadlock and preparing to sting the girl.

Rachel gasped and tried to wrench her hand out of Lyra's grip but much to the girl's surprise, Lyra held on a lot tighter than she could've possibly thought. The leech was surprisingly strong. The wicked sting drew back, ready to stab down on Rachel's arm and inject the mind-controlling venom that made Lyra such a deadly opponent. But the teen-rodent would never get to experience what it was like to be mind-controlled. Just as Lyra was about to inject her, somebody charged up behind Lyra and elbowed her in the back, making her bend backwards and cry out, more in surprise than pain, and let go of Rachel. It had been Daniel, much to everybody's surprise. The teen-dog maybe skittish but whenever Rachel was in danger, he often put on a brave face and stood up to the threat. He then wrapped his arms around Lyra and pulled her back, making the leech cry out as she tried to pull herself free.

"You leave my sister alone!" Daniel cried.

Growling viciously, Lyra elbow-thrust the dog in the stomach, making her opponent release her and she spun around on the balls of her feet, sweeping a kick through the air into Daniel's head. He was knocked down onto his side, yelping in pain and grimacing. He put a hand to his face, rubbing the spot where he'd been kicked. Lyra then licked her lips as she knelt down over the downed canine. He fangs glistened as she opened her mouth.

"I wonder what your blood tastes like little doggy..." she purred, her tone of voice almost sounding seductive.

That made Daniel cry out in horror and try to get up so the leech couldn't bite him. But Lyra pinned him down, preventing him from going anywhere, and she lowered her head, her fangs just inches away from the dog's neck. Rachel saw what was about to happen and tried to run over to help her brother but the two guards Lyra had controlled began shooting at her, forcing her to retreat to avoid being hit. Lyra's teeth just lightly pricked against Daniel's skin but that was as far as she got. Her feast was interrupted by a heavy kick coming out of nowhere and slamming straight into her forehead, snapping her head back and throwing her through the air. It was Mandy. The enraged mouse had decided to act quickly before Lyra could hurt her son. Lyra hit the ground, wincing as the impact sent spasms of pain surging through her back. Now Daniel was safe, Mandy helped him up and hugged him with relief.

"Oh my baby boy...are you OK?" she asked with concern.

"I-I-I'm f-f-fine n-now mom." Daniel stammered, "Oh g-god, i-it w-was s-so scary! Sh-she was g-gonna b-bite me! S-s-suck my b-blood I think!"

"Thank goodness I got there in time." Mandy said, sighing, "You were very brave standing up to her and stopping her from stinging your sister Daniel. I'm proud of you for that."

Those encouraging words made the dog feel a little better. Maybe he was getting braver as the years went by after all. Both mother and son looked ahead as Lyra picked herself up, grunting as pain flared through her skull. She felt the bruise that had been left there by the kick Mandy had launched on her. The leech's ditzy nature had now dissipated. There was only rage and anger on her face now.

"OK...that does it...NO MORE MISS NICE GIRL!" she screeched angrily, "I'M GONNA KICK YOUR BUTTS, RESCUE RAMIREZ AND FEAST ON YOUR BLOOD IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO!"

"You're welcome to try you freak!" Mandy snarled, daring the crazed female to come to her.

Growling viciously, Lyra dropped down on all fours and charged towards Mandy like an angry tiger. The charge made Mandy recoil slightly. She hadn't expected the leech to react like this. She suddenly got a lot scarier when she was angry! Lyra then pounced on Mandy, knocking her down onto her back before the veteran Royal Fighter even had time to react. Daniel cried out in terror, watching as the crazed S.T.I.N.G agent took his mother down to the ground. Mandy found herself being pinned down as Lyra held onto her limbs and kept her from moving. Mandy pushed back, fighting hard against the leech's surprising strength. Lyra strained to keep Mandy down, her dreadlocks waving menacingly. She had to admit that Mandy was a pretty cute looking woman. How fun would it be to make her into a dolly! She lunged at the mouse with one of her stingers, narrowly missing as Mandy shifted her head. Before she could retract it though, Mandy turned her head again and clamped her jaws around the dreadlock. Lyra let out an ear-piercing scream of agony as the mouse's powerful teeth sank into her dreadlock. To her, it was the equivalent of pulling her hair, only far more painful. Mandy had bitten her so hard that she even drew blood. Lyra let go of her opponent and wailed in anguish, clutching her bleeding dreadlock. That gave Mandy the perfect opportunity to stand back up and sock her in the face again.

Just like before, Lyra was sent hurling back by the enhanced punch. It really felt more like being hit by a charging rhino than a punch as she was whisked off her feet and sent sprawling onto the ground. She shook her head, trying to fight off the pain in her head. She wasn't going to let a silly little headache slow her down, not when there was a chance she could still win. She glared ahead as Mandy came charging towards her, fists clenched and ready to go to town on her. But then the two police officers under her control began shooting at her, catching the mouse by surprise as laser blasts skimmed by her. She was forced to abandon the fight and dive for cover as the officers shot at her. Seizing her chance, Lyra ran off towards the NMDC. She'd get inside and then she'd be able to break Ramirez out at last! But only one obstacle now stood in her way. Sgt. Spike had gotten to the entrance before her and he now pointed his

pistol at her, his gruff, wrinkled features curled into a scowl of menace.

"I wouldn't walk into this prison if I were you." he warned, "I have an itchy trigger finger and I won't hesitate to shoot you in the legs if you take another step."

Lyra no longer cared about her own safety. She would willingly take as many laser shots as she could handle if it meant succeeding at her mission. She jumped up into the air and hurtled towards Sgt. Spike. The bulldog took aim but was too slow to fire, crying out as the leech landed on him and pushed him against the door. He grabbed Lyra but only managed to throw her off just seconds after the leech stung him. Now the venom was crawling through his veins and making him susceptible to her control. His eyes went grey and his expression fell vacant, as if he no longer knew where he was. Lyra giggled merrily. Looks like things were finally looking up for her at last! She now had the perfect person to get into the prison and get Ramirez out.

"Hey wrinkly-face, I've got a job for you!" she ordered, "Get your butt in there and release Ramirez the Chameleon from his cell!"

"Yes mommy..." Spike droned, his voice distant as if he was speaking from miles away.

He turned around and opened the door. Lyra turned away and ran off to get back into the fight, leaving Spike to do his job. Unfortunately for her though, Wilson had seen her sting Spike and had immediately concluded that she'd managed to put him under her spell too so he ran off after the bulldog as he entered the NMDC. He hated having to abandon his wife and children but he couldn't let Sgt. Spike release Ramirez. The possessed officer strolled past several cells, looking out for the one that Ramirez the Chameleon had been locked up in. He was suddenly tackled from behind by Wilson as he pounced on him. He cried out as he found himself falling forwards and crashing down onto the floor. Growling, he turned around and grabbed Wilson by the face. He pushed the dog away but he wasn't

given a chance to get back up for just as he got up on one knee, Wilson grabbed him and pulled him back down again. Ramirez could hear the fight going on from his cell and he pressed his face against the wall to see what was happening. He wondered what was going on as he tried to take in what he saw. Why was Wilson fighting a police officer? It was either a S.T.I.N.G. agent or Lyra controlling him. Whichever it was, he just hoped that Sgt. Spike won. His victory could get him out of here.

The other guards on duty in the prison saw Wilson and Sgt. Spike brawling with each other and for a moment, they weren't sure what to do. Should they interfere? If so then who should they be fighting? Wilson or Spike? They soon got their answer for the dog saw them and called out to them.

"Sgt. Spike's being controlled by a leech!" he cried, "Somebody help me subdue him so we can cure him!"

The guards understood immediately and all charged towards the fight. They weren't going to enjoy having to manhandle their sergeant but they couldn't let whoever it was use him as a puppet against them. Wilson let go of Spike and stepped back as several guards pounced on him and pinned him to the floor. Spike was strong but even he was no match for the combined strength of several men and women piling on him at once. One of the guards even drew out a taser and jabbed it into the possessed guard's neck, jolting him with sparks of electricity and knocking him out instantly. His head fell forward and his body went limp. The only movement that could be seen was the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. Wilson wiped his forehead, relieved that Spike had been subdued before he could release Ramirez.

"Whew, good work men." he complimented, "We'll get him to the hospital so we can cure him from the mind control he's been put under. You all stay guard and make sure nobody else tries to get in. Lyra may try to send in more controlled guards to try and get Ramirez back."

"Yes sir!" said one of the officers.

Satisfied with the turnout, Wilson darted back outside to see how the fight was going. He could see that Lyra was spinning around on the tips of her toes and whipping Mandy with her dreadlocks. The two police officers she'd controlled were still shooting, but their attention was mostly on Spike's other men while Lyra was dealing with his wife and kids. Seizing his chance, Wilson ran towards Lyra and threw his sword at her. The leech saw it coming and squealed, ducking before it could hit her. In doing so, she had left herself vulnerable to an attack from Mandy. The mouse drew a leg back and threw it straight up into the leech, walloping her and almost taking her into the air. Lyra rolled over and landed on her side, wincing in pain. Wilson's weapon returned to its owner and the orange-furred dog jumped towards Lyra, the weapon raised high above him. The leech picked herself up and jumped aside as the dog landed just centimeters in front of her. Wilson swung the blade, cleaving the air just above Lyra's head as she bent down to dodge and then Lyra threw herself into Wilson's stomach, headbutting him and sending him staggering. She grabbed his wrists and pulled on the double-bladed sword, trying to yank it out of his hands. The dog held on tightly, baring his teeth and refusing to let go. Lyra then kicked him in the shins, making the Royal Fighter yelp and loosen his grip. This allowed her to snatch the weapon from his hands and then spin around, slashing the dog across the belly with it. Wilson doubled over, crying out loud in reaction to the cut that had been drawn across his stomach. Lyra then drew the sword back, ready to stab Wilson in the leg with it. If he couldn't work, he'd be easy enough to get by and maybe take home for Scorn to roboticize.

Mandy could see what Lyra was planning to do and so she ran towards her, throwing herself down on her side and sliding towards the villainess. She hurtled straight into Lyra's legs, taking them out from underneath her and bringing her down onto her back. She dropped the double-edged sword and Wilson quickly grabbed it, ignoring the pain in his stomach as he lunged for it. Lyra stood back up and quickly shot forwards, jabbing Wilson in the cut on his belly.

This made him double over and grimace so she could try and snatch the sword off of him again. But then Mandy grabbed Lyra by the tail and hauled her away from her husband. Lyra yanked her tail free from Mandy's grip and punched the purple-furred rodent in the gut. As Mandy bent over, she then elbowed her between the eyes, sending her staggering and almost falling over. Laughing, Lyra then jumped up and spun around, roundhouse kicking the mouse in the face and throwing her back. The single boot to the head had left Mandy feeling momentarily disoriented as she skidded backwards and fell down onto one knee. She rubbed her head, trying to ease the pain in her head and get the world to focus again. She could make out Lyra running towards her, though she looked to be swaying a little. Taking her chances, Mandy threw a punch at her. To her delight, she had managed to time and aim it right and ended up hitting Lyra just in the solar plexus. The enhanced punch threw the girl off her feet once again, sending her hurling backwards as if fired from a cannon.

Daniel and Rachel stood in front of her, timing their next move just right so they could land a blow on her. They both lunged out with a kick each, hitting the leech in the back and knocking her down onto the ground. The siblings were both pleased with themselves for getting that hit just right and they both fist-bumped each other in congratulations. They had trained hard to get a move like this just right and were glad to see it pay off. Lyra got up onto her knees, panting and gasping. She was beginning to get worn out. Her injuries were effecting her stamina from the bruises on her face to her bleeding dreadlock. As much as she hated to admit it, the leech knew for a fact she couldn't keep the fight going for much longer. Even the two cops she'd controlled weren't helping much anymore. They were outnumbered and now Sgt. Spike's men were closing in and pouncing on them to subdue them. Ramirez hadn't emerged from the prison, meaning that Sgt. Spike had failed too. It looked as if she was going to have to retreat.

Forcing herself up onto her feet, Lyra glared angrily as Wilson and Mandy approached them, looking confident in themselves. They had

every right to be, this battle was theirs and they knew it.

"You really thought you could pull this off alone, didn't you?" Mandy sneered, "Ha! You did give us a good work out but sorry to disappoint ya Lyra, your best wasn't good enough."

"Your plan is a bust." Wilson declared, "You'll never save Ramirez now and you can't possibly go on much longer. So if you'll be nice and surrender, we might give you a shorter sentence."

"Hmm, surrender, get tossed in a cell, hmm, let me think about it." Lyra said, pretending to mull it over for a few seconds before replying, "I thought about it. NO!"

She pulled out a small contraption from her dress pocket and placed her thumb over the button.

"I surrender, but not the kind that means I'm letting you dweebs lock me up! I'm just gonna go home and tell daddy how horrible you've been! He'll be really furious and wanna beat you morons up for it!" she cackled, stabbing down on the button.

Wilson and Mandy could only watch incredulously as Lyra disappeared in a bright, white flash, leaving no trace of herself behind. So it seemed that S.T.I.N.G. had teleportation devices, something else they'd have to look out for now. Next time they fought S.T.I.N.G. agent, they'd make sure they had no teleportation devices on them. Now Lyra was gone, Mandy let out a heavy sigh of annoyance.

"Ugh! Don't you just hate it when the bad guys get away like this?!" she moaned, "Drives me up the wall, it really does!"

"It gets on my nerves too dear. " Wilson agreed, "But look on the bright side! We stopped Lyra from rescuing Ramirez. We still have him prisoner so we've still got an advantage over S.T. . I'd say today has been a total victory for us."

Mandy smiled at her husband, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, I'd say so too handsome." she said, "We also know how Lyra works and how to be careful around her. That'll help us next time she tries controlling anybody."

"Definitely." Wilson mused, "Now all this is over, we can get those affected by Lyra's power to the hospital so they can be cured and give Queen Sally the good news, she'll want to hear this."

"Given what crap we had to deal with earlier, good news is exactly what the queen will want to hear." Mandy agreed, "I wonder if the blue dude's woken up yet?"

"If he has then he can hear the good news too." Wilson beamed.

He turned and walked over towards the two policemen that had been controlled. The other cops had mercifully knocked them out so they couldn't be forced to attack their own friends anymore. Mandy was about to head over to help her husband but somebody tugged on her arm and stopped her. It was Daniel. He and Rachel were standing before their mother, looking a little nervous. Even Rachel looked uncertain, her feet pointing inwards and her hands behind her back.

"So mom...uh...did we...do well?" Daniel asked worriedly.

"Me and my bro did well in this fight, didn't we?" Rachel added.

Mandy could see that the kids were feeling uncertain about themselves. She understood this perfectly. They'd always been quite admiring of her heroism, and her husband's heroism too. They wanted to be just like her and Wilson. Smiling gently, Mandy patted both their shoulders.

"Kids, you did great out there." the mouse said softly, "Rachel, you really showed Lyra you don't mess around and Daniel...you was very brave when you stopped Lyra from stinging your sister. I'm very proud of you both."

Those words seemed to have a magic effect on the two siblings. Their nervousness faded away and changed into pleasure and relief. They both smiled, pleased to receive such compliments. They both hugged Mandy with gratitude.

"Thanks mom." Rachel said graciously.

"We really will become like you and dad won't we?" Daniel asked.

"You will kids...you really will." Mandy replied, meaning every word that she had said.

The happy mother kissed both her kids on the forehead to congratulate them. She couldn't wait to see her children in battle again some time soon. They had done well now and were likely to do well again. Daniel and Rachel were destined to become great Royal Fighters and Mandy knew it...

"...thanks for telling us this Wilson and Mandy." Queen Sally Acorn answered, speaking into her phone, "We're very relieved to hear this. Looks like the day's looking up for us. S.T.I.N.G.'s plans have just gone down the drain today! I'll see you later, thank you for what you did today. You're both to be compensated for your efforts. Thanks, bye."

Back at the Soleanna Medical Centre, Sally and Zoe had been keeping watch over their still comatose king while Sonar had taken the Soleanna Royal Family to be cured from Lyra's control. She knew how to deal with the kind of venom that Lyra had pumped into their bodies to make them susceptible to her control and was keen to get them cured as quickly as possible. Sally had just been informed about Team Prower's mission and how things had been going at New Mobotropolis. The chipmunk couldn't have been happier to hear that it was all good news, with some slight bad news to go with it. The good news mattered more to her so she was still able to allow herself the luxury of a smile and a sigh of relief. Zoe could tell from her mother's reaction that things had gone well.

"So it's good news then mom?" she asked.

"Very." Sally replied, "Team Prower was able to infiltrate Orca Island and while they didn't capture Akhlut, they were able to escape from his grasp and send him packing. We could potentially used Orca Island to our advantage if we need to use it. As for New Mobotropolis, they got Nicole's message for Sora asked her to pass it on to everybody. Thus they were prepared for the inevitable and were able to stop Lyra the Leech from rescuing Ramirez."

"That's awesome!" the princess cried, punching the air triumphantly, "We rock! Whoo! S.T.I.N.G. can take those failures and choke on them!"

"It certainly makes things a lot better for us given their earlier attacks." the queen agreed, "They burnt down our castle and nearly killed Sonic. We're owed a victory like this to make up for those horrors."

"So what's gonna happen now then?" Zoe asked curiously, "With Akhlut and Lyra still at large, are we gonna be hunting them down or something?"

"Of course dear." Sally said, her lovely features forming into a smirk on her face, "I intend to send out platoons of R.F.S. soldiers and cops to hunt those criminals down. As for Ramirez, Sora tells me that she's going ahead with the threat she gave him earlier. He withheld valuable information and thus she's going to send him to a prison where nobody will find him and leave him to go insane with isolation. Maybe then, he'll be willing to tell us everything and not withhold any information whatsoever."

"That's the least that bastard deserves!" the teen princess growled, "Disguising himself as a cop and releasing Fang and withholding information from us..."

"I wish we hadn't had to resort to such underhanded tactics but the wars with Eggman and the Dark Armada has taught me that

sometimes the moral high ground doesn't always work. There are times you have to be a little more ruthless." the queen murmured, "It's not a lesson I'm happy to have learnt but it has its uses."

"It sure does." Zoe nodded, "But we don't have to be as cruel as S.T.I.N.G. are. We're better than them and we can show it by not stooping to their level!"

Sally smiled in agreement. Her daughter was definitely getting wise and she couldn't be happier to see as such. She'd taught her well and seeing her education paying off in the child was making her feel grand inside. The queen chipmunk was about to reply to Zoe but something happened that made them stop in their tracks. They both looked over at the bed and saw a sight they'd been wanting to see for a while now. Sonic...was beginning to move. The comatose king was stirring in his sleep, letting out quiet moans as he climbed out of the pit of darkness his consciousness had fallen into. The two females gasped with delight as the hedgehog stretched and slowly opened his eyes. His vision was blurry for the moment but he quickly adjusted himself as the room came into focus and looked ahead. He saw his beautiful wife and daughter looking back at him with tears in their eyes and big smiles on their faces. This was possibly the best sight he could wake up to. Sonic smiled, his face still groggy but showing some of that famous Sonic attitude he was known for.

"Hey ladies. How long was I out for?" he asked, his tone completely light-hearted as if he'd just woken up from a short nap...

Hooray, Sonic's awake and Lyra failed her mission! :D

So all that's left to do really is wrap up this story. Tune in next time for the finale to "Double Weddings" as we get to finish the weddings we've been wanting to see, and this time WITHOUT S.T.I.N.G. interrupting...

Double Weddings: Chapter 8

15 Years Later Chapter 2: Double Weddings

Chapter 8: The Wedding Commences

It had started with a double wedding, a ceremony that was supposed to see four Royal Fighters tie the knot between each other. Then the wedding had turned into chaos when S.T.I.N.G. had tried to assassinate Sonic the Hedgehog. But things had gone in the R.F.S.'s favour and thanks to the capture of S.T.I.N.G. agent plus evidence left behind, they had been able to track down the ones who had tried to kill Sonic. While the agents themselves hadn't been captured, their missions had been jeopardized so things had still gone well for the R.F.S. They still had one of S.T.I.N.G.'s agents captured and Sonic had been healed by Sonar the Long-Eared Hedgehog.

And now he had finally woken up, the nurse's healing powers having finally repaired everything inside of him. He was strong enough to come out of his coma. He sat up in his bed and smiled at the sight of his beloved wife and child. He noticed how stunned they were to see him awake. They had clearly been waiting for him to wake up the whole time. The king smiled casually as if nothing had happened.

"Hey ladies. How long was I out for?" he asked.

Zoe was the first to react, her face so full of joy that she looked like she was about to explode. She leapt onto the bed and threw her arms around her father, happy tears streaming down her face.

"DADDY! OHMIGOSH, YOU'RE AWAKE!" she squealed delightedly, "I missed you so much while you was out! Thank Mobius you're awake now!"

Sonic patted his daughter's back softly, pleased to receive such a happy welcome back from the princess. He couldn't have woken up

to anything more pleasant.

"Aww, thank you so much kiddo." the king said kindly, "I didn't realize you loved me so much."

"Dad, you're my idol and my hero! Of course I love you!" Zoe exclaimed, "When Akhlut shot you, my heart nearly stopped! I...I was so worried that you was gonna die dad! I'd never felt so scared in all my life!" she added, hugging her father tighter.

"It'll take more than a gunshot to take your old man down sweetie." Sonic replied casually, "So, what happened while I was out of it?" he asked, glancing at Sally.

"We took you to the Soleanna Medical Centre and got you this room so the doctors could look at you." the queen explained, "Then Sonar the Hedgehog heard the news and came running over here as quickly as possible. She used her magical healing abilities to mend your wounds Sonic and you spent the rest of your time just recovering while you was still in a coma. We managed to find out who shot you and we sent Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora to arrest them. They sadly failed but they did send them packing so it'll be a while before we ever hear from them again."

Sonic took all of this in with interest and fascination. He had a feeling that Sonar had had something to do with his recovery. He remembered the first time he'd met her a few months before Zoe was born. He'd broken his leg in a freak accident while running and the nurse hog had healed his leg with her power. He made a mental note to thank Sonar for saving his life should he see her at all.

"Sonar's such a miracle nurse I swear." the king said brightly, "One wave of her hand and the hedgehog's all better now! Pity my best buddy and his pals didn't arrest the guys who shot me though. Who were they exactly?"

"An orca named Akhlut was the one who shot you and as well as Ramirez, he was working with a leech named Lyra." Sally answered,

"Lyra has mind control powers and she used them to make the Soleanna Royal Family attack us and try to kill you while you was still comatose."

"She did WHAT?!" Sonic exclaimed, "Holy crap, did they hurt you two?!" he asked worriedly.

"Don't worry dad, me, mom and Sonar managed to stop them." Zoe said happily, "Sonar managed to work out what had happened and we passed the warning on to our friends. Because of this, Wilson and Mandy were ready for Lyra when she attempted to rescue Ramirez. They managed to send her scurrying away with her tail between her legs!"

Sonic broke into a fit of laughter upon hearing this story. If there was one thing that always made him smile, it was hearing how his friends made fools of his enemies.

"Man I'd have loved to see the look on Lyra's face!" he cried, "Ha, ha, ha! I bet S.T.I.N.G. are gonna be right pissed off over how badly they've failed today!"

"Indeed so Sonic." Sally replied, leaning in closer to her husband, "We foiled their assassination attempt, stopped their minions and kept hold of one of their agents. This is what I call a good day."

She then placed her hand on Sonic's chest as she leaned in closer and locked lips with the king. Sonic embraced his wife and returned the kiss, a warm sensation spreading from his head to his toes. This kiss more than made his waking up from his coma worthwhile. How he loved it when his lips locked with his wife's. He ran his fingers through the queen's beautiful, auburn hair as they kissed. Zoe watched, awed by the adorable scene before her.

"It's so good to have you back Sonic." Sally whispered softly as their lips parted.

"It's good to BE back Sal." Sonic replied, lightly stroking Sally's ear, "Your handsome husband couldn't stay out of it forever could he? I'd have died of boredom otherwise!"

Sally knew the joke was bad but she couldn't help by smile anyway, her lovely features spreading out into a smile as she surpassed a chuckle. She had missed her husband's sense of humour and was glad to hear it once more. The happy couple rubbed noses together before falling into another embrace, their eyes closing and their lips locking again. They kissed together for a good couple of minutes before the door opened and somebody walked in. It was Sonar. The long-eared hedgehog had come in to deliver some news but she paused for a moment as she saw Sonic and Sally kissing together. The couple separated and Sonic glanced over at the nurse hog. Sonar began to blush, suddenly feeling awkward and out of place.

"Oh...um...I guess I came in at an inappropriate time...heh, heh...um...I'll leave you two alone for a minute." she stammered.

"No, no, it's fine Sonar, come in!" Sonic replied cheerfully.

"Dad's awake Sonar! He came out of his coma at last!" Zoe piped excitedly.

Sonar sighed, glad to see she wasn't causing any problems. She walked into the room and approached her patient, happy to see her handiwork paying off once again. Her face curled up into a smile of pleasure and delight as she sat down on the bed beside Sonic.

"Your majesty. It's a pleasure to see you awake again." the medic said, bowing down to the royal hedgehog.

"You don't need to do that Sonar. I'm not one of those really regal kings or anything." Sonic chuckled, "Anyway Sonar, I wanna give you my sincerest thanks for saving my life. I was probably done for when I get shot and thanks to you, I can run for another day! I don't know how I can repay you for your selflessness Sonar, coming all

the way over to Soleanna just to save me! It's way past cool of you to do that for me!"

Sonar found herself blushing with pleasure, twiddling her fingers shyly as she took in the compliments. While she enjoyed doing what she did, she was a little shy when it came to praise and often found herself not knowing how to respond.

"O-oh g-g-gosh...I-I d-don't know w-what to s-say your m-majesty!" she cried bashfully, "I-I-I'm j-just a simple medic d-doing her j-job. Th-that's all. Y-you don't need to g-give me s-so much praise!"

"Of course I do!" Sonic retorted humorously, "You saved my life! You deserve all the thanks I can give! In fact, I'm even gonna reward you for your services today Sonar! I'll probably give you about 20,000 Mobiums as a token of my appreciation, it's the most you deserve!"

"Oh please your majesty, you don't have to shower me with money to say thank you." Sonar replied modestly, "I'm just happy I can use my...miraculous power to save lives. Saving your life was more than enough to reward me King Sonic."

The king nodded, understanding the nurse-hog's reasoning. He supposed a doctor's true reward was whenever they saved a life. Nothing could top that in their eyes. He simply shrugged.

"I can't blame ya for feeling that way Sonar." he said kindly, "Though I really do wanna give ya some kind of gift to compensate you for your services. It's the least I could do. Just say what ya want and it's all yours."

"Well, I always have wanted a ruby necklace to wear." Sonar admitted, "I like rubies, especially in a necklace, and I think I'd look quite lovely wearing one. I think my friend Evan would agree on that too."

"No sweat then! Once the two weddings are over, I'll have that necklace delivered to you." Sonic promised.

His mind suddenly went click as something occurred to him and he let out a gasp of surprise.

"Oh my gosh, the weddings! What happened about those then?" he asked worriedly.

"We put them on hold for the time being." Sally replied, tenderly fingering one of Sonic's quills, "We were planning to resume them once you were better and we found out who shot you. Once Tails and his team come home, we can resume the weddings. That is, if the Soleanna Royals are better too." she added, turning to Sonar.

"That's what I was going to tell you." the medic replied, "They're completely decontaminated now and while they were shaken to the core by the mind control, they should be fine in a couple of hours."

"That's great!" Zoe piped, "Dad, is it OK if I can see Elise and her parents? Maybe I can help them get better." the princess requested.

"Sure sweetheart, go ahead." Sonic said, more than happy to grant that request, "Elise could do with a friend like you right now."

Having been a victim of control due to the times he had been roboticized, Sonic knew full well how it felt to be back to normal with the knowledge that you had been taken over and used against your will. He could easily empathize with the Soleanna Royal Family and what Lyra had made them do. Zoe's presence would greatly comfort them given how well she had gotten on with them during their stay in the city. Sonar gestured for Zoe to follow her as the princess prepared to leave. She left the room with Zoe behind her, leading her to where the Duke, Duchess and Princess were being kept. Sonic and Sally were now left alone for the time being. The queen lay down on the bed beside Sonic and turned on her side. She placed a tender hand on her husband's chest, her lips close to his ear. Sonic put his hand over Sally's enjoying the feeling of having his wife beside him. His idea of relaxation was a quiet moment with Sally beside him. It could brighten up even the darkest of days in his eyes.

"I'm so glad that you're better and that S.T.I.N.G. have failed today..." Sally whispered softly.

"I know Sal. I'm glad I didn't get killed either." Sonic replied, "Though I really can say that S.T.I.N.G. have earned my full and willing attention now. I'm gonna get every security force on the damn planet looking for them and I ain't stoppin' until every last S.T.I.N.G. agent is arrested and locked away forever! Then they can quit ruining our lives and trying to bring Eggman's legacy back from the hell it deserves to stay in!"

"We could be on a wild goose chase Sonic. We can't possibly know how many agents S.T.I.N.G. has or where they are." Sally said worriedly, "We could be forever doing this."

"It'll be worth it when we put an end to their nightmare." Sonic growled, "They kidnapped our daughter, they tried to kill me, TWICE now, they burnt down our castle and they ruined my best buddy's wedding! They've really crossed the line now and I'm not gonna rest until every butt of theirs has been kicked! Then when S.T.I.N.G. is no more, we can rub our hands clean from Eggman's presence once more, this time for good!"

"I sure hope so honey..." the queen said doubtfully.

But as the couple thought about S.T.I.N.G.'s downfall, they were given something else to focus on shortly after. They could hear footsteps approaching the room and saw that the people coming too them were just the four people they wanted to see. Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora had come back from Orca Island and had been quick to stop by the Soleanna Medical Centre to see how Sonic was doing. Tails saw immediately that he was awake and quickly rushed into the room, his face lighting up into a smile of immense joy. Sonic sat up, smiling at the sight of his best friend. Tails knelt down beside Sonic's bed and grasped his best friend in a warm hug.

"Sonic! You're awake! Alright!" Tails exclaimed, "I'm so happy to see you out of your coma!"

"Hey Tails, it's great to see you too!" Sonic replied, returning the hug.

"When you were shot Sonic, I thought you was done for!" Tails cried, "It felt as if somebody had reached into my chest and started crushing my heart. It was horrible! I was so worried that you were gonna die! We were so lucky that Sonar came and now you're all better and awake at last! This day just keeps getting better!"

"I'll say little bro." Sora replied, her face filled with awe, "Ever since Sonic got shot, things have turned out for the better for us. S.T.I.N.G. can really choke on those failures now!"

"You said it!" Sonic winked in response, "Sally told me everything that happened while I was unconscious. You guys went out to get the guy who attacked me but he got away right?"

"Unfortunately." Cosmo confirmed, "But we do know who it was so we'll be able to track him down easily enough. He's an orca named Akhlut and he's very easy to spot thanks to his muscular figure and his metal fin. He's quite skilled in battle and has psychic powers so we have to be careful next time we fight him."

"So he's a big jerk with psychic powers? Got it. And what's Lyra like aside from having mind control?" Sonic asked.

"We don't know, we never met her." Ruben said, shaking his head.

"But Wilson, Mandy and their children have." Sally explained, "They described her as being very detached from reality, having the mindset of a child and being utterly crazy but she's quite capable of holding her own and seems to be anything but stupid. So please, whatever happens guys, don't underestimate her if you ever run into her. She managed to mind-control a few police officers, including Sgt. Spike, and came close to controlling Rachel!"

Tails and his team nodded understandingly. They knew too well just how much appearances could be deceptive. Many of their enemies

in the past had proven to be surprisingly capable in a fight despite looking weak and un-threatening.

"We'll treat Lyra with the utmost seriousness my queen." Ruben vowed, "We won't let her crazed personality deceive us into believing she is weak."

"I'll say. She actually managed to mind-control me just so Akhlut could get me to answer his questions." Tails muttered, "But like that did him any good since Lyra failed to rescue Ramirez anyway."

"That explains how she knew where to find him then." Sonic mused grimly, "I'm gonna have to give Lyra a piece of my mind for that! Nobody mind-controls my best friend and makes them reveal secrets to the enemy!"

"Believe me, I'd pay good money to see you spin-dash that bitch to bits..." the twin-tailed fox growled, "But at least we won't have to worry about her or Akhlut for the time being. For now, we can be glad that everything's settled and our weddings can continue!" he added excitedly.

"You got that right bro!" the king hedgehog agreed, "Once the Duke, Duchess and Princess are OK, we can resume the ceremony and get you, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora married at last! And this time, with NO interruptions!" he added, winking.

"Before we do that though there's two things that need doing." Sora put in. She felt a little guilty having to bring up something like this when the atmosphere was so pleasant and happy but it had to be done, "First of all, I'm gonna make some calls and get Ramirez located to somewhere more isolated and unknown to teach him a lesson for what he did."

"And two, I may need Nicole to give me a scan." Tails added, knowing what Sora's second thing was before she could bring it up, "You see, for some reason, I felt a sharp pain in my gut as I was about to arrest Akhlut. It made no sense as to why it happened given

I wasn't stressed or anything like Zoe had been. So I think I may need a scan to see if there's anything wrong with me."

Sonic and Sally gasped in surprise. This was the second time this had happened now. One of the Royal Fighters runs into S.T.I.N.G. and then gets a bellyache later on? For Zoe, it made sense since she had been stressed and angry when it had happened but now it was happening to Tails, and he wasn't one to get stressed or angry usually. Twice was usually coincidence, but the king and queen had a feeling that this was no coincidence. There had to be something going on. Sally reached under her dress and pulled out Nicole's handheld form. The computer was on a strap she had around her leg. She opened up the device and spoke to it.

"Nicole, could you run a quick diagnostic scan on Tails to make sure he's alright?" the queen requested.

"At once Sally." the digital lynx replied.

Nicole's avatar appeared from out of the handheld device and stood before Tails. It was so realistic looking that everybody felt like they were looking at a real Mobian that had appeared by magic and not a hologram. Nicole then scanned Tails, the green beams leaping out of her eyes and sweeping over the fox as it scanned every single detail on the fox's body. Nicole picked up everything from his blood-type to his DNA structure, as well as the bruises that he'd received from Akhlut in the fight. The scan was completed, over within mere seconds.

"Well, aside from a few bruises presumably from the battle with Akhlut, I cannot pinpoint anything out of the ordinary with Tails. He seems fine to me." Nicole announced, sounding confused that she had to be saying those words.

"But then why did my stomach just hurt for no reason?" Tails asked, "I can't be fine if something like that happens! There must be something wrong with me..."

He suddenly cried out, his face contorting with pain as doubled over and clutched his stomach. He felt as if something was crawling around inside of him, but he wasn't sure why. Everybody jumped in alarm, surprised to see what was happening. Cosmo quickly put her arms around Tails, worry etched all over her pretty features.

"Nicole, scan him again!" Cosmo cried, "There must be something wrong that you might pick up now!"

The A.I. Mobian quickly scanned the fox once again, sweeping her beams over him. The pain hadn't quite gone away so Nicole was able to pinpoint where it was in the fox's belly. Her eyes fixed on the centre of Tails's stomach and as she fixed on it, she could see that there was a slight bulge moving slowly across from the inside. It wouldn't be noticeable given the victim would cover it with their hands when clutching their gut but as Tails lowered his hands, she could see it. The beam swept over the bulge just as it went away. As the beam lightly touched it, she picked up something she hadn't picked up when she'd scanned Tails before. A very faint electronic signal. That was impossible, Tails wasn't a robot so why did he have an electronic signal inside of him? Nicole suddenly knew what was wrong, her eyes wide with horror.

"Oh my god...Tails...I think you've been bugged!" she shrieked, "I could see something moving and I'm picking up a very faint signal that's electronic in nature! It was impossible to detect at first because it was laying dormant but we were lucky it moved just briefly so I was just able to catch it!"

Tails went very pale in the face. Cosmo looked equally as shocked, staring at her fiance as if he was a dangerous weapon. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. He...had been bugged?! But how?! When even?! Then suddenly, the fox realized something. Yes, it all made sense now!

"Of course...Akhlut knocked me out before he took me prisoner!" he exclaimed, "He must've bugged me while I was unconscious, hence

why I didn't know about it! We've gotta get this thing outta me right now!"

"There's no telling what that bug's in my best friend for! S.T.I.N.G. could be using it to turn Tails into a spy or use it to slowly kill him from the inside out or anything!" Sonic exclaimed.

"It was hard detecting the bug to begin with so it maybe a little hard to expel from Tails's body but I shall give it my best shot." Nicole declared, "I'll try and find it again and see if I can take control of the bug, make it exit his body so we can see it for ourselves."

"If that fails then I may have to perform surgery to get it out that way." Sonar suggested, "Though I hope we don't have to do that. The weddings have been delayed enough as it is."

Nicole nodded agreeably. The lynx closed her eyes and held her hands out, focusing hard as she tried to find the bug once again. Everybody fell silent, scarcely daring to breathe as Nicole worked away. It was as if they were afraid even the slightest noise would distract her and that it was best to keep quiet. Nothing happened for a long time. Would Nicole find the bug again? Would they have to wait until the next time it moved so she could pinpoint it. Then suddenly, Nicole's head flinched as if she had just been startled. Her eyes were still closed but it was clear something was happening. Her face was tensing up and little pixels were beginning to build up and swirl around her head. Everybody stared, wondering what was happening. Then Tails cringed as he felt something move inside of him. But the curious thing was, it appeared to be moving UP. It had moved around his belly before but he could feel something rising up as if he was about to vomit. Then he felt something reach up to his throat and he began hacking and coughing, trying to get rid of whatever it was that had come up.

Then he let out one loud, throaty cough and threw up onto the floor. Everybody looked away in disgust. As Tails spluttered, catching his breath and wiping his mouth, he saw that the floor had more than just some of his own vomit on it. There was something small

crawling about, soaked in sick as it looked up at everybody. It was the robotic cockroach that Akhlut had put inside the fox. He stared at it in utter disgust, feeling as if he was about to be sick again.

"SWEET MERCIFUL CRAP, WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!" he screeched in horror.

"That was the bug." Nicole explained, glaring at it as if the very presence of the thing offended her, "It was inside your stomach Tails and although it took a while for me to pinpoint it due to the faint signal, I was able to find it and I managed to override its programming, forcing it to come out of you. It must've been inserted down your throat for that was where it exited. I'm sorry I caused you to throw up but it was the only way it could be removed." she added apologetically.

"You've done brilliantly Nicole, well done." Sally complimented, "Now what to do with the little machine?" she added, looking down at the robo-roach as it tried to shake off as much vomit as possible.

"We could just stomp on it and forget it ever existed." Sora muttered, "Seriously, how dare those monsters do this to my brother! It's just sickening they did that to him!"

"I've got a better idea." Tails said, reaching down and picking up the little machine that had been forced out of his body, "We can keep hold of it, use it for research. Maybe there's a way we can use this thing against S.T.I.N.G. Looks like once again, their actions end up benefiting us." he added, smirking.

"Good thinking there bud." Sonic said agreeably, "Boy I'd love to see the look on Scorn's face right now!" he jeered.

"It'd be so priceless, that much is certain." Sally agreed, "But we needn't worry about them now. You're better now, Tails has been debugged, S.T.I.N.G. have been foiled so for now, the only thing left to do is to resume the double weddings and enjoy the rest of the day."

"You won't get any arguments from me Sally." Tails agreed.

Today had looked grim and could've ended in tragedy. But for everybody in the room, it was going to end far better than it had started and would more than make up for the horrors they had had to endure...

"UNACCEPTABLE! YOUR INCOMPETENCE HAS BROUGHT EMBARRASSMENT AND SHAME TO OUR ORGANIZATION!"

All was not well in S.T.I.N.G.'s headquarters. Akhlut the Orca and Lyra the Leech had both returned to Scorn with nothing but bad news to give their leader. Lyra had met up with Akhlut just shortly after fleeing New Mobotropolis and had told the muscular sea mammal what had happened. Akhlut had told Lyra about his mission, embarrassed to admit to her that he'd failed. They had both expected a harsh lecture from Scorn and weren't at all surprised they received it. The roboticized scorpion hadn't shown them any mercy in his verbal assassinations, only inches away from laying the smack down onto the two.

"You two were more than qualified to carry out this mission and what happens instead?! You both come back to me with more failures to report!" Scorn growled, his tail poised above him as if he was ready to attack them with it, "S.T.I.N.G. does not tolerate failure, especially after how successful our first attack was, and we expect nothing but success from our operatives! Instead, all you have for me are excuses!"

"It wasn't our fault!" Akhlut retorted, "The Royal Fighters are just tougher than we give them credit for! How are we at fault for getting bested by a team of heroes?! Maybe if you hadn't sent us alone, we might've had a chance of winning!"

"You was in your home base Akhlut, you had all the back up you needed!" Scorn snapped viciously, "And Lyra, you have mind-control

powers! I hope you've got a decent justification for why you failed." he said coldly.

"I have no excuses daddy." Lyra said, her hands behind her back and her eyes all big and sad looking as if she was a naughty child being scolded by her parents, "Only that my best clearly wasn't enough."

Scorn didn't even respond to her. He just stood up straight and lowered his tail.

"This is definitely a dark day for us. S.T.I.N.G. has encountered several failures today." he muttered, "We failed to assassinate Sonic the Hedgehog and Ramirez is still in R.F.S. custody. I will have all agents I have on high-alert for him so that we may rescue him from their incarceration. Also, as you've told me Akhlut, you managed to bug Tails so we do have a bonus. Today wasn't a complete loss after all."

"Indeed not." Akhlut agreed, "We'll still be able to roboticize him at least."

"I'm afraid not my sea-faring friend." came a haughty, arrogant voice from the other side of the room.

Swoop the Bald Eagle had entered the room and walked up towards Scorn, concern on his face for he knew his leader wasn't going to like what he was about to hear. Akhlut and Lyra watched, wondering what the inventor had to say.

"It appears the heroes have smartened up to us." Swoop reported, his hands trembling as he spoke, "I got an emergency signal from robo-roach number 8643. Something was able to override its command program and force it to leave Tails's body. I guess they somehow found out about the bug and got their pesky A.I. friend, Nicole, to remove it."

Akhlut's jaw dropped. That was impossible! Swoop said the bugs were meant to be untraceable! How could the Royal Fighters possibly have found it?! Scorn seemed to be thinking the same thing. He grabbed Swoop by the collar and hoisted him off the floor as if he was as light as a feather.

"You promised me the bugs were untraceable Swoop. Care to explain how you was wrong this time?" he snarled, his voice sounding as if he was about to suddenly murder Swoop right on the spot.

"I think I know master!" Akhlut put in, "You see, Tails double over in pain and clutched his stomach, giving me chance to get away. I guess maybe he got curious about that and possibly asked to be scanned. Though that doesn't explain how it was found out..."

"That's a problem I'll have to fix then." Swoop muttered, angry that his brilliant bugs had a design flaw, "I'll have to make it so that they don't move once they're inserted and lay dormant until we give the signal for them to control the victims. They'll never find anything that way."

Scorn nodded in agreement, putting Swoop down on the floor and leaving the feathered fiend to straighten his coat. Mistakes were made so they could learn from them. The R.F.S. had exploited their mistake but now they could see to it that it never happened again. Looks like today had something good to come out of it after all.

"The Royal Fighters maybe have found out about the bug in Tails but they still haven't discovered the bugs in any of the other Mobians we've managed to get our hands on, especially Sonic's precious daughter." Scorn purred, "And now we're going to fix this little flaw to prevent them from being detected again, they'll never know about any other robo-roaches we insert into our victims. Project: Robius will still be a success."

"I couldn't agree more sir." Swoop crooned, "Those fools will never stop us from achieving our goals!"

He cackled a cruel, menacing laugh that contained no trace of humour or charm, just sadistic pleasure. S.T.I.N.G.'s plans were far from over and the Royal Fighters would have no idea about it until it was too late. They thought they'd won? They were wrong. Their victory was barely even a chink on their impressive armour as far as S.T.I.N.G. was concerned.

"Oooh, oooh, daddy! Daddy! Permission to speak? Pretty please?!" Lyra suddenly piped eagerly.

"Don't grant it Scorn, we suffer enough every time she opens her noise hole!" Akhlut pleaded.

Scorn ignored the orca's pleading and walked closer to Lyra. He was intrigued to hear what the artificially created Mobian had to say. After all, she had been the one to suggest the plan to finish off Sonic earlier so maybe she had something else of worth to say. He looked down at the child-minded leech.

"Permission granted." he said softly.

"I've got some info that you might be interested in." Lyra explained, "You see, we said that we captured Tails right? Well I made him talk, just as we mentioned earlier and thus we knew where Ramirez was. Isn't mind control wonderful? Well, he told us that Sonic was saved from death by a nurse with a magical healing ability named Sonar. Imagine what we could do with power like hers eh daddy?!"

"Ah yes, of course! How could I have forgotten?!" Akhlut gasped, slapping himself on the head, "Yes, that's exactly what you did Lyra! Tails told me himself thanks to Lyra's power that this "Sonar" nurse person saved Sonic from my assassination attempt!"

Scorn took all of this in with complete and utter interest. His face was unreadable but chances are, if he was able to emote with it, he would have the face of somebody who had just heard the greatest story he'd ever heard in his entire life. His roboticized brain whirled as he thought about this and began to formulate a new plan in his

head. Scorn was one of those people who could come up with a plan no matter what kind of information he was told. He tapped the side of his face with a sharp, pointed claw with interest.

"Lyra...you continue to amaze me." he complimented, "Now we know how Sonic was saved. So the Royal Fighters have a nurse with magic powers? I would've assumed there was no such thing as magic but life has taught me that sometimes, the fine line between fiction and reality is never always clear. This Sonar person could be useful to us..."

He fell silent for a couple of seconds before carrying on.

"Lyra, do you know what Sonar looks like?" he asked.

"I do indeed daddy!" the leech piped, "Thanks to me controlling the Soleanna Royals, I could see through their eyes and stuff! Telepathy is weird, I know but it gets the job done right? Anyway, she's some brown hedgehog with big ears and big hair! I think she'd make a lovely dolly for me honestly though I don't agree on her rather revealing outfit. Not appropriate for a nurse and..."

Scorn waved a hand dismissively.

"Yes, yes, that was all I needed to hear." he said hastily, "Given she's with the R.F.S., her base will likely be in New Mobotropolis. She was only in Soleanna so she could save Sonic. Before we try to kill that hedgehog again, we will have to deal with Sonar and relinquish her of her power. That way, she won't ever save Sonic's life again."

Swoop, Akhlut and Lyra all nodded and grinned in agreement. What a brilliant idea! Get rid of Sonar's power! How sad the Royal Fighters would be when they found out their precious nurse wouldn't be able to save anybody again!

"Swoop, get me Cassia and Clove! Tell them I have an important job for the two." Scorn barked sharply.

"At once master!" Swoop saluted, turning on his heels and leaving the room.

Scorn watched him leave before turning away himself and walking off. The Pronghorn sisters would be perfect for this job. Ramirez wouldn't have told anybody about the Elite Eleven because he didn't know who the other members were. Scorn had made sure only he and his four founders knew the full roaster so their agents wouldn't be able to tell anybody who else was in the Elite Eleven in the event of a capture. Nobody would know the two worked for him...until it was too late...

While S.T.I.N.G. was already planning its next move, something far more pleasant was taking place back in Soleanna. Something that the world had been wanting to see before S.T.I.N.G. had interrupted it with their cold-hearted attack on Sonic the Hedgehog.

It was the late evening now, the sky beginning to change into various shades of blue, pink and orange as the sun began to sink down behind the horizon. It was still visible as if it was trying to keep its light shining just a little longer before nightfall. It was a beautiful twilight, and just the kind of atmosphere to add to the romantic scene that the large crowd of Mobians had gathered to watch again.

The Soleanna Royal Family had recovered from Lyra the Leech's control and had been very quick to resume the weddings. They felt that the brides and grooms had been kept waiting long enough and it was time for them to finally get their happy ending. Wedding marches played as Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora strode down the aisle and towards the palace, right where the Duke, Duchess and Princess were standing. They were back in their wedding clothes and looking very happy that the horrors of today had gone and their weddings could finally continue. The Royal Fighters all watched and smiled with some crying at the sight of the two couples. Every team was delighted to watch as four of the New Mobotropolis Royal Fighters were about to be wed. Sonic held Sally's hand as the queen wept with joy for the soon-to-be-weds.

"Oh Sonic...I don't think I've ever been so happy for them!" Sally whispered, happy tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You and me both Sal." Sonic replied, "They've done much for us today and now they're gonna be married. Could this day end any better for them?"

Sally nodded, turning back to see the two couples as they reached the stairway into the Soleanna Palace and stood still, looking up at the Duke of Soleanna as he prepared to begin the ceremony. The wedding marches stopped playing, bringing the whole crowd into silence as if the volume had been turned to mute. A few seconds of silence hung in the air before the Duke spoke. His wife and daughter stood by him, wiping their eyes.

"Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, heroes of all ages. We are gathered here today outside the very doors to the Soleanna Royal Palace for a most special occasion." The Duke announced.

He looked down at Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora as they looked up at him, the respective couples holding each other's hands.

"Today, we are gathered here to bare witness to the union of two very special couples. The esteemed Royal Fighters and heroes of New Mobotropolis, Miles "Tails" Prower, Cosmo the Seedrian, Ruben the Water Panther and Sora Prower. They come to us today to build the bond that will see them united forever in hand and heart as the ceremonial union that is marriage brings them together..."

He spoke for a long time, the crowd listening and waiting patiently. Zoe was standing idly by, waiting eagerly to bring the rings to the couples. She was so happy that she was seeing what a REAL wedding was like, and this time without guns, blood and attempted murder. This must've been what her mum and dad felt like when they had gotten married. The Duke then turned to Tails and Cosmo.

"Do you, Miles Prower, take Cosmo the Seedrian to be your lawfully wedded wife?" he asked.

"I do." Tails replied, looking at Cosmo with adoration in his handsome, blue eyes.

"And do you, Cosmo the Seedrian, take Miles Prower to be your lawfully wedded husband?" the Duke asked, turning to the alien plant woman.

"I-I do." Cosmo said tearfully, beaming as her beautiful eyes stared into Tails's.

The Duke then turned to Ruben and Sora.

"Do you, Ruben the Water Panther, take Sora Prower to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." Ruben answered, smiling as he looked over at his beloved vixen.

"And do you, Sora Prower, take Ruben the Water Panther to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do...I really do." Sora answered, running a hand down Ruben's back.

"If anybody has any reason why these four shouldn't be joined, let him speak now or forever hold their piece." The Duke announced, addressing the crowd.

No objections arose. There was no need to. Why would anybody object to two such wonderful unions between two very lovely couples? With nobody objecting, the Duke gladly carried on.

"May I have the rings please?" he asked.

Zoe's stomach tingled excitedly. Her big moment was here! Being careful not to make any mistakes, the princess approached the two couples with the four wedding rings perfectly balanced on the satin cushion she carried. Sonic and Sally held hands, awed as they watched their daughter carry out her duty. It filled them with glee to

seeing Zoe do what she'd been dying to do since the weddings had been planned. The princess reached the couples and held out the cushion.

"Th-the rings D-Duke." she said, slightly nervous but managing to keep under control.

The Duke strode down the steps and took the cushion from Zoe. He held it out for Tails and Cosmo first. The twin-tailed fox took his ring and slid it onto Cosmo's finger. How beautiful it looked on the Seedrian's hand he thought.

"With this ring, I thee wed." he announced, a slight twinge of uncertainty in his voice despite his rather calm and collected posture.

Cosmo took the other ring and slid it onto Tails's finger. How heart began to feel warm as she saw how lovely the ring looked on the fox's hand.

"W-with this r-ring, I thee wed." she stammered, trying not to get too tearful.

The Duke then held the cushion out for Sora and Ruben to take their rings. Ruben slid his onto Sora's finger, liking the way her hand felt in his as he put it on.

"With this ring...I thee wed." he said slowly as if making sure he didn't flub his lines.

Sora returned the gesture, sliding the other ring onto Ruben's finger. A small tear escaped her eye as she slid it on.

"With this ring, I thee wed." she said, ignoring the tear as it crept down her cheek.

"I now pronounce you four husband and wives." The Duke announced, "The two men may kiss their brides."

Tails and Ruben didn't hesitate for a moment, throwing their arms around their wives and kissing them passionately as if this was the most romantic moment of their lives. Cosmo and Sora embraced their husbands and returned the kiss, feeling all the love they had for their men swell up inside them. The crowd broke into cheers of joy and tears of delight as the couples kissed. The weddings had now commenced and the two couples were now married. What a perfect ending to the day this was, for all of them. All the joy and love in the world could be felt in the presence of the crowd and couples as they celebrated this happy union.

Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora knew that their married lives had begun...and there was so much more for them to come as their lives carried on...and they would be united until death do its part, happy and content to spend their lives with each other forever...

Aww, I love a happy ending! ^^

So that's it for "Double Weddings". Next time, Knuckles and his family get the spotlight for it's Knuckles's arc next time! Tune in to 15 Years Later as we begin Knuckles's arc "Valuable Relics"...

But before that, there will be TWO mini-chapters, the first of which will be introducing us to the next member of the Elite Eleven, Clove the Pronghorn and her cyborg sister, Cassia! Don't miss it! :D

Mini Chapter: The Elite Twelve Part 2

15 Years Later Mini Chapter: The Elite Twelve Part 2

The Desperate Siblings

"Sis, I'm so bored right now! When are we gonna do something exciting?!"

"When S.T.I.N.G. has a job for us Cassia. I don't know how many times I have to tell you this."

"But it's been days since Akhlut and Lyra botched up their missions and even then, it's been far too long since the last time we got to do anything! I wanna do something or else I'll die of boredom!"

Clove could only sigh irritably at her sister's incessant whining. That was the bad thing about Cassia, the fact that when she was bored, she REALLY had to make a scene about it. She would practically parade around the base moaning that she was bored and need something to do. She had warned Scorn about this the day that he'd recruited her to be part of his "Elite Eleven" and had recommended giving assignments to her and Cassia regularly to keep her younger sibling from being bored. Sadly, Scorn didn't seem to have taken her suggestions to heart.

"Man I wish we'd never joined this stupid organization!" Cassia grumbled, slamming her hands down on the table as she sat down at it again, "Not only do they talk out of their asses about how great Eggman is and how much Sonic sucks all the time but they don't give us anything to do more often than not! Why can't we just leave them already?! It's not like they're gonna blow our heads off if we try to leave right?!"

"I've told you Cassia, we have to stay a part of S.T.I.N.G. until the time is right. And the time isn't right so far." Clove said, trying to

explain herself as best as she could, "We can use our positions to potentially hinder them from behind the scenes. Scorn's given us the opportunity we need to bring them down and we can't waste that opportunity. Not to mention you're still recovering at the moment, we still need S.T.I.N.G.'s treatment until you are fully better Cass."

She and her sister both knew all too well that S.T.I.N.G.'s treatment was the one thing that had gotten them into this mess in the first place. It was only fitting that they let S.T.I.N.G. finish treating Cassia before they made their move. But the younger sibling wasn't having any of it, still looking extremely adamant about it.

"I'm fine Clove, quit worrying already!" Cassia sighed, "I don't even feel like I'm still recovering right now! I feel as if I've fully recovered! Besides, why do we have to pretend to be loyal to Scorn? Let the Royal Fighters do it! They even HAVE somebody who is a spy for goodness sake! Let them put in somebody to sabotage S.T.I.N.G. from behind the scenes, we don't have to do it!"

"We do Cassia, and that is the end of it." Clove snapped, "Drop. The. Subject."

Cassia was about to argue some more but she saw the stern, cold look on her sister's face. Clove had the kind of stare that could freeze the blood and every time she made it, Cassia always seemed to suddenly lose her argumentative streak. The younger sibling sighed and lay back in her chair, swinging her feet up onto the table.

Cassia and Clove were both Pronghorns, a type of deer that was quite common in the world of Mobius, especially around Nekronopolis. Despite being sisters, they both looked very different to one another. And that wasn't just down to their fur colours and the shape of their antlers either.

Clove was a perfectly normal looking Mobian Pronghorn with green fur, huge eyelashes and beautiful purple eyes. She had large ears and small antlers with two points on her head. The only thing that wasn't normal about her was the way she dressed. She wore a

brownish-grey dress with a long skirt section reaching down over her bottom, white gloves with gold cuffs and black leggings with huge golden hoof-like sections where the toes would be. The outfit looked as if Dr. Eggman himself had designed it thanks to the white lines around the torso area, yellow cubes in places and even the shape of the cuff sections of her gloves. This was part of S.T.I.N.G.'s obsession with Eggman, they made most of their minions wear Eggman-inspired outfits.

Cassia was less normal looking than Clove, wearing long gloves that left her shoulders bare, a black shirt, baggy grey trousers and huge chunky boots that gave her an almost military-like appearance. Her uniform had an Eggman-theme going on too but that wasn't the only thing about her that made her stand out. Her entire head was robotic, making her look as if somebody had cut off her own head, taken the body and placed a robot head on top of it to replace it. The head was a darker green than Clove's fur was with a green roll-shaped "hair-do" perched on top of it. The ears were robotic too and Cassia's two one-pointed antlers were metallic and sharp. Her eyes were optics, pools of black with yellow lights that could be counted as "pupils" for her. The head wasn't the only inorganic part of Cassia, some of her insides contained cybernetics too.

Clove had become one of the first members of the Elite Eleven to join S.T.I.N.G., joining the team a few months before S.T.I.N.G. had made its first move against Sonic. It was a decision that she had come to regret, though she had to admit that being an Elite Eleven member did provide some interesting opportunities for her and Cassia to bring the evil organization down from the inside. Though it wasn't just that that was keeping her from leaving. Only Clove knew this, Cassia herself being completely in the dark about the whole thing. She had a feeling her sister was hiding something and wanted her to be open about it. But Clove seemed unwilling to talk. The deer just uncomfortably shifted and then changed the subject. Cassia was thinking about asking now, wondering if Clove would open up at last. But she worried that she was beginning to annoy Clove so she

decided not to ask. Lowering her feet off the table, the younger deer cleared her throat.

"So um…how about that eh? Four Royal Fighters had a double wedding." she said feebly, hoping this was enough to start a conversation, "I wish we could've seen that. Would've been great!"

"I'm sure it would have." Clove muttered, "I'd rather have been watching those two weddings than lounging around pretending to be loyal to those cultists. I hope that Tails, Cosmo, Ruben and Sora have a happy life as married couples…"

Her voice seemed to trail off as her head turned and she looked away for a moment. She seemed almost lost, distant, completely absent from the room for a moment. She had suddenly gone very far away even though she was still at the table and in the same room. Cassia tilted her head, wondering what was troubling Clove. She hated seeing her sister looking so stoic and empty. What she wouldn't give to see her smile again!

"Clove? Yo sis! You still with us?" she asked curiously.

Clove blinked heavily, snapping out of her thoughts and looking back over at her sister.

"Yes, sorry about that. Just…a lot on my mind, that's all." Clove said gently, "Please don't worry Cass."

"You've been very different since you brought me here to get better…" Cassia noted, her optics displaying her eyes in a shape that made them look like she was expressing sadness, "You insist to me over and over that everything's fine but, I dunno, it doesn't look OK Clove. Please sis, you can tell me these things. Don't hide it. What's up? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Clove began to feel even more uncomfortable. It was bad enough waiting for S.T.I.N.G. to give her an assignment so Cassia didn't have to lounge around being bored but now her sister was probing

her. She hated having to lie to Cassia, having to pretend that things weren't as complicated as they actually were. She didn't like being secretive and wanted to tell Cassia what was wrong. She never kept secrets from her ungulate sibling, she was always open to her. But she couldn't tell Cassia what was wrong. How could she possibly break the news to her? She'd be heartbroken and may even resent her for causing this to happen. This was all her fault. Clove knew that Cassia could never know, not while her life was on the line.

Trying her best to compose herself, Clove stood up from the table and walked past her cyborg sister.

"Cassia, I'd like a moment alone please. If you want something to do, why don't you put on a video-game or something?" she asked, her tone polite but devoid of any emotion. It was as if she was suggesting this just to get rid of Cassia rather than anything resembling love or kindness.

"Well…OK then…if that's what you want sis. Call me if you need me." Cassia said solemnly. She sounded hurt and Clove could understand why.

They had once been very close but ever since S.T.I.N.G. happened, they had been more distant, as if they were drifting apart. Cassia only wanted to know if everything was fine and Clove kept pushing her away. Unknown to the cyborg ungulate, this kind of attitude was tearing Clove apart from the inside. She wanted to remain close to Cassia, as they always had been. She didn't like having to be more distant and act as if she wanted nothing to do with her all the time. But it was the only way to keep her from having to tell Cassia what she didn't want to tell her.

Cassia left the room, glancing over her shoulder as Clove seemed to stare at the wall ahead. As soon as she left, Clove breathed in and out slowly, trying to keep herself composed. She knew she couldn't keep her emotions bottled up forever, she'd need to let them out eventually. Her face full of sorrow, Clove walked over to a nearby desk with drawers and opened one of them. The room she was in

had very little to offer with only a table and a desk. It was easy to find something you wanted to find in this place. She reached into the drawer and took out something very precious to her. She kept it in the drawer at all times and let nobody but her look at it. It was for her eyes only. Clove looked down at the thing in her hands, brushing away a few dust particles.

It was a picture frame containing a picture that was more valuable to her than it ever had been before. It was a picture of herself having a selfie with Cassia. Cassia was the one taking said selfie, her right arm extending off of left side of the picture. She was fully organic in the picture, not a hint of her cybernetic treatment anywhere. Both sisters were smiling with Cassia looking more excited and enthusiastic than Clove did. It was the last picture they'd ever had together before things had all gone wrong.

Clove thought back to where her troubles had begun. Just a few months ago, that was when, just a few months ago when Cassia had suffered a terrible allergic reaction that had been near-fatal to her and started all of this, and yet to Clove it felt even longer than that. She had suffered from allergies all her life and as she'd been getting older, the poor deer's allergies had been getting worse and worse. The last reaction had severely damaged her eyesight and hearing and she had been forced to stay in hospital for several weeks. The doctors had doubted she would even get any better, even if she wasn't suffering from an allergic reaction right now. When Clove had broken the news to the bedbound Cassia, the reaction she'd received had been the most heart-breaking moment of her life. Cassia had cried for hours on end upon being told she could be permanently ill and may even lose her sight and hearing completely. Clove had never felt so crushed in her life. She had even cried for her sick sister, wondering if she'd ever be able to stop. The clincher had been when Cassia had asked the one question that had haunted her for weeks.

"Clove…am…am I…g-going to die…?"

The question had plagued her mind, leaving Clove to spend many a sleepless night worrying about her sister. How she loved Cassia! Her fun-loving nature, her optimism, her horrible sense of humour, she wanted it all back! But it seemed that the Cassia she knew was gone and she only had what was left of her dying sibling to keep her from going completely. And then things had gone from bad to worse when she had received a message from a strange man in a large coat and hat not long before her recruitment into S.T.I.N.G….

Nekronopolis Hospital, several months ago…

Clove had lost count on how long it had been since Cassia had been admitted to this hospital. To her, it could've been a week, several weeks or even several months. Maybe even an eternity had passed and she'd barely noticed. Time didn't seem to have any meaning anymore. All she knew was that Cassia was receiving treatment and that it wasn't enough. The doctors couldn't save her damaged eyes and ears and they were beginning to doubt that they could save Cassia herself. She wasn't responding much to the treatment, which was already showing signs that death was coming and the longer she was kept in the hospital, the more she seemed to deteriorate. It was an absolute nightmare for Clove to be witnessing and she could only pray and pray that some miracle would save Cassia.

She had heard about New Mobotropolis's miracle nurse, a woman named Sonar who supposedly had magical healing powers and had hoped she'd be able to save her sister. But unfortunately, Sonar was too busy to come over and help. She had been assigned to several operations and a few incidents that required her healing ability. Sonar couldn't leave her own work to come to Nekronopolis, though she had insisted to Clove she would try and spare a moment to come and look over Cassia. Weeks had passed and still the nurse-hog hadn't been able to get a free moment. Clove had even doubted that Sonar would even bother coming. Maybe she didn't care about Cassia and was all too happy to leave her to die. Trust New Mobotropolis to get the best things in life and keep them to

themselves! This whole thing had left Clove beginning to resent Sonar and maybe New Mobotropolis too, though she couldn't bring herself to think ill of the R.F.S despite this. She was still grateful to them for saving the world so many times and making sure that her and Cassia were still alive to this day.

But as Clove looked over her deathly-ill sister, she began wondering if the world coming to an end by Enerjak's hand would've been more merciful a death for Cassia than this. At least it would've been over quick and she wouldn't be suffering. Cassia turned her head and looked at Clove, her eyes looking unfocused as she tried to make her out.

"C-Clove, I c-can hardly see you…" she whimpered, "Y-you're j-just a blur t-to me. I'm s-scared…so, so scared! I d-don't wanna lost my sight!"

" Ssshhh, don't panic Cassia. You'll get better soon. I promise." Clove whispered, softly stroking the ungulate's hand.

" I'm sorry, w-what?" Cassia replied, "I can't hear you. S-speak up please."

Clove's face fell. It wasn't just her sister's eyes that were damaged. She repeated the sentence, speaking a little louder but not too loud as if worried she'd just damage her sister's ears even more. Cassia was able to make out enough of what Clove was saying to understand her but she didn't seem convinced by her words.

" I've been here forever and I'm not getting any better…" she said weakly, "Face it Clove, the doctors can't help me. I…I kinda want to die right now. I'm just lying here always suffering, always in agony. I just wanna die…"

Clove found herself being smashed to pieces from the inside as she took in her sister's words. Cassia was in so much agony right now that she was begging for death to come! The Cassia she had once known would NEVER say something so morbid. It seemed that when

that allergic reaction had stricken, it had done more than damage Cassia this badly, it had taken away what had made her Cassia. No longer was she the fun-loving, optimistic girl Clove had grown up with. She was just a hollow shell, empty of the primary components that had made Cassia who she was. Not wanting to cry in front of her sister, Clove stood up and walked out of the room, leaving Cassia to lay back in her bed while watching a green blur get smaller and smaller.

Clove closed the door behind her and headed towards the women's toilets. Her eyes were beginning to sting as tears threatened to cascade down her cheeks but the deer didn't let them out, not when there was so many people around in the corridors. She would let it all out in private and then come back to be by Cassia's side. The least she could do was let her sister die with the comfort of having her beloved sister with her for her final minutes. But just as she was about to enter the toilets, somebody approached her. She turned around and saw what appeared to be somebody wearing a large coat and a wide-brimmed hat. If Clove had just seen this man on the street, she would've assumed he was some kind of detective. He certainly looked the part. But he was here, in a hospital and standing out like a sore thumb due to his clothes. Several people in the corridor stared at him incredulously, unsure what to make of this stranger.

The man looked down at Clove, towering over her like some kind of god waiting to pass judgement. He was very tall, much taller than most Mobians Clove had seen. The deer began to feel nervous, wondering what the man was going to do. Part of her told her to run away but her legs wouldn't obey her brain. She stood fixed to the spot, unsure of what to do.

" You got a problem miss?" the man asked. He had a thick Brooklyn accent and a slithering voice.

" N-n-no s-sir, I-I-I was j-just going to u-use the toilets." Clove stammered.

" Ta cry no doubt. I can see it in your eyes doll-face, you look like yer about to break down any moment now." the man replied, "You've got a problem and I'd be interested ta know what it is."

He then put a huge hand on Clove's shoulder and pushed her into the toilets, seemingly not bothered by the fact he was just walking into the ladies room just like that. Luckily, there was nobody in the room, just the two of them. Clove could feel her heart beginning to pound. She was getting more and more nervous. Was this man going to kidnap her, beat her or even kill her? She wanted to scream for help but fear had gripped her by the throat and wouldn't let go. She was too frightened to do anything. The man looked down at her again.

" L-l-look, I d-don't know w-who y-you are b-but th-there's n-n-nothing I can g-give you sir." Clove stammered, "P-please, j-just l-leave me alone and d-don't hurt me! I-I d-don't w-want any t-trouble, please!"

" Calm yourself doll-face, I ain't gonna hurt ya. How could I hurt such a pretty face?" the man asked casually, as if expecting those words to suddenly make everything OK, "I'm here ta help ya. You've got a problem and I wanna know what it is. Why? So I can help ya fix that problem. That's my job miss, I'm here ta help those in need."

Clove was stunned, so stunned in fact that she could barely speak. This man, this total and complete stranger…wanted to help? She could hardly believer her ears. Surely she was going mad! At the same time, maybe this was the miracle she'd been waiting for. Maybe this man could help her save Cassia! He might know something nobody else knew and find the right treatment to save her sister. Allowing herself a moment to ease her nerves, Clove responded to the man's offer.

" You're here to help people?" she asked, "Who are you? And who do you work for exactly?"

" I'm not authorized ta give answers to questions like dat sweetheart. I'm only authorized ta ask questions ta people in need." the man replied, "So go on, tell me. What's yer problem?"

Clove began to feel a little suspicious about this man. If he wasn't authorized to answer questions like "Who are you?" then how did she know she could trust him? But there was something about desperation that made you forget about details like this. She was so desperate to save her sister that she was pretty much willing to do anything to save Cassia's life, even sell her soul to Satan himself if she had to. She swallowed a lump in her throat before answering the man's questions.

" My name is Clove and I have a sister named Cassia." the deer explained, "Cassia's been deathly ill for weeks now. She has a terrible hypersensitivity disorder and is prone to really bad allergic reactions. She had one a few weeks ago and it's really taken its toll on her. Her eyesight is damaged, her hearing is also damaged and she's wasting away. We're all very worried for her, me especially. I love her so much and I don't know what I'd do without my sister! I…I can't lose her! I can't let her go, not like this! She's too young to die! Oh sir…I…I just don't know what to do! I can only hope that you have a way we can save my sister!"

She then threw her arms around the man and wept uncontrollably into his chest, not even aware that she was actually hugging him. Her shoulders heaved as she howled, tears soaking the man's coat as she cried into it. The man didn't even hug her in return. He just looked down at her, allowing her to release all her grief. It seemed that he was too respectful to put his hands on a crying woman like this. After a couple of minutes, he then patted Clove's head softly and raised her head up so she could look into his eyes.

" Doll-face, I know a guy who can solve all your problems." the mysterious Mobian said, "What yer sister needs is a cybernetic treatment. Cybernetics are the answer to all yer problems. The guy you need is a man named Swoop, a genius who specializes in all

things technical and medical. Just give him a call and he'll be happy ta save yer sister."

Clove was so relieved to hear this news that she felt like she could just explode with joy. Hallelujah, this was it! The miracle she'd been waiting for! This man did indeed have the answer to her problems! He was like some guardian angel that had been sent down to help her and her sister! What luck this was for her! Happy to hear this, Clove hugged the man again, this time smiling brightly. The man didn't show any emotion whatsoever, clearly used to receiving reactions like this.

" Oh bless you! Bless you, bless you, bless you! I don't know how I can thank you for your generosity sir!" she cried out, "Oh thank you so much!"

" Don't mention it sweetheart." the man replied nonchalantly, "My work here is done now. Ya won't see me again after this miss. Yer next step is ta call Swoop and arrange an appointment with him. Here's his number, and whatever ya do…DON'T lose it." he said coldly.

He handed Clove a small card that had a phone number on it. Clove looked down at it, seeing what was on it. It said:

Swoop's Medical Clinic: The Hospital That Cures Anything!

Call 0800 8643 5295 to book your appointment now

It certainly sounded promising, though Clove had to wonder why she'd never heard of such a place. Then again, she'd not really travelled outside of Nekronopolis much so she didn't know much about the world outside of her city. Nevertheless, she had the key to her sister's survival in her hands. Clove even felt that this mere phone number was more like a Golden Ticket to glory everlasting more than anything. She looked up to thank the man for his services but curiously enough, he wasn't there anymore. He'd just vanished! The pronghorn would've assumed she'd imagined the whole thing

had it not been for the fact she still had the phone number in her hands and the sight of the bathroom door just swinging shut. She stood alone in the toilets, unable to believe that all of this was happening. A miracle cure for her sister!

But then Clove began to have doubts about the whole thing. How would Cassia feel about having cybernetics? Would she be grateful for such a treatment? Would she be devastated at this idea? Clove began to wonder if this was a good idea. Could she do it? Would it be better if she just let Cassia die peacefully in her bed? No. She couldn't let Cassia die. She had her life ahead of her! She couldn't die yet! There was a way to save Cassia and Clove was determined to carry it through. Her sister was going to live! Pushing all doubts out of her mind, Clove dug out her mobile phone and dialled the number. Her stomach tingled as she pressed the numbers, making sure she got them right. She put it to her ear and waited until the call was accepted and a soft, male voice began to purr from the other side.

" Greetings from Swoop the Bald Eagle dear customer." the voice said, "You have called Swoop's Medical Clinic, how may I help you?"

" Hello, I'd like to arrange an appointment for somebody." Clove answered, "My name is Clove and I have a sister named Cassia who is in dire need of your help right now Swoop. She's in a critical condition and I got a tip off that you could help with that."

" I can cure any condition my dear." Swoop preened, "So please, do tell me what is up with your sister so that I may prepare the correct treatment for her…"

And thus the appointment had been made and scheduled. To Clove's surprise, Swoop had wasted no time in getting Cassia booked for an appointment. He'd even made sure that she would be his next patient and nobody else was lined up next for him. It seemed strange, almost too good to be true that these guardian angels were going through all this trouble just for her. Maybe these

people were really angels and that was why they were doing all of this, all on behalf of God who sent them down there to save Cassia's life. Clove had never believed in God but as of now, she was beginning to very much believe there may be such a thing after all.

Upon delivering the news to Cassia, she had told her everything, including the fact she was going to have cybernetics in order to save her life. To Clove's relief and surprise, the bedbound pronghorn had reacted quite pleasantly. She didn't seem bothered about the fact she was going to become a cyborg, rather she seemed amused by it.

" This'll be cool! I get to be a cyborg!" she'd cried out as best as she could, "I bet I'll look totally awesome!"

" So you're OK with this then Cass?" Clove asked, "You're not troubled in anyway by this?"

" I don't care what happens to me as long as I can stop being sick all the time!" Cassia replied, "That and I really want my eyes and ears to work again. If you ever see that guy in the coat and hat again, I want you to bring him to me so I can thank him myself for recommending this treatment to me."

" I'll be sure to do just that." Clove replied, "Oh Cassia…I'm so glad that you're gonna get better at last!" the deer exclaimed, smiling brighter than she'd ever smiled in her life.

The man had been true to his word when he'd told Clove she wouldn't see him again. After the appointment had been made, he hadn't shown up at all, not even to wish Clove luck as a car had come to pick her and Cassia up to take to Swoop's clinic. He wasn't even at the clinic itself when the pronghorns had arrived. Clove didn't care about that though. All she was focused on was getting Cassia inside so she could be given the treatment.

Upon arriving at the clinic, she'd wheeled Cassia inside on a wheelchair and waited for her appointment to begin. She hadn't

waited long before Swoop called for the two deer and Clove brought Cassia into the room. Swoop's room was full of electronic equipment and contained all kinds of cybernetics from robot arms to robot legs and even robot parts meant to go inside the body. Clove's first impression of swoop was that he didn't look very scientific or even medical, the only thing suggesting such qualities being the white long coat he wore. But as soon as he began talking, the pronghorn could see that Swoop was indeed very knowledgeable about both science and medicine. He observed Cassia, taking note on just how critical her condition was.

" Dear me, the poor girl's practically on death's door!" he muttered, "She's essentially a cripple what with her eyes and ears not working well and always feeling ill! It's no wonder you had to call me Clove, those incompetent idiots at Nekronopolis could never have cured your sister given how much they THINK they know about medicine but in reality, they know nothing. You're just lucky you got my number or else poor Cassia would've been finished!"

" What did he say?" Cassia asked.

" So you're positive the cybernetic treatment is all she needs to be cured?" Clove asked, a tone of concern in her voice.

" It's the ONLY treatment that will save her now." Swoop insisted, "Now then, please wait outside while I begin the process. I assure you, Cassia will be just fine with me."

He gave Clove a smile that should've been friendly and reassuring but to Clove, it looked more…sinister and somewhat creepy as if he was indicating Cassia was anything but fine. She shook it off and turned to Cassia.

" I'll see you when your operation is over sis." she said softly, hugging Cassia as if this was the last hug they'd ever have.

" Fingers crossed this works!" Cassia piped, hugging Clove back.

" Of course it'll work! Everything I do works my child." Swoop gloated, grabbing Cassia's wheelchair and wheeling her towards the operating table.

Clove watched before turning around and leaving the room, wondering what Cassia would look like when the whole thing was over. Whatever she looked like, she would still be Cassia to her, that was what she told herself. And she was so looking forward to seeing her sister all better and more like her old self again…

The operation had taken several hours to perform. Clove had spent the whole time just sitting around anxiously waiting for the news that it was done and Cassia was awake to see her. She'd barely spoken to anybody and ate very little when lunch time had arrived. Although this treatment was going to save her sister's life, she couldn't help but still worry that it might not all work out. It was possible that something could happen after the operation was over. Cassia could be changed by the experience, a terrible side-effect could happen, the cybernetics may not even save her after all. It was too late to pull her out now though so Clove would just have to accept the consequences. The deer just prayed that everything would be alright.

Despite all this, she had actually managed to fall asleep, if only for a few moments. She lay back in her chair with her eyes closed and had begun snoring quietly until suddenly, the door opened and Swoop called out to her. Clove woke up as quickly as she'd fallen asleep and got up to her feet. The bald eagle had a smile on his face that told her the good news before he'd even said a word.

" The operation is over. Your sister is ready to see you now." he announced happily.

Clove darted into the room faster than her brain could even give her the order to do so. As she entered the room, she was very quick to notice that Cassia had been changed by the operation. Lying on the table was no longer a fully organic Mobian deer, but a cyborg one

with a metal head and optics in place of eyes. Despite this, Cassia still looked very much the same as before, merely looking as if her head had just been turned into a robot head. The change wasn't so drastic as to make her look unrecognizable, which was one thing that greatly relieved Clove. Cassia was looking around, clearly pleased to be able to see clearly again with her new optics.

" Wow! I can see again!" she cried out excitedly, "This is amazing! And I can hear things clearly again too! This treatment was just what I needed!"

" Cass! You're all better now!" Clove exclaimed, running up to her sister and throwing her arms around her.

This was quite possibly the best day of her life and she would never experience anything this wonderful ever again.

" You bet I am!" Cassia replied, hugging her sister in return, "I'll admit, it feels a bit weird having a robotic head while the rest of me is organic but luckily, I don't look hideous or anything! I think I look kinda cool, even if it'll take a while for me to get used to being a cyborg. But hey, I'm all better now! It's a miracle Clove, this operation was just what I needed!"

" It certainly was…" the pronghorn whispered, happy tears streaming down her face, "I'm so, so glad that everything's alright. I can't wait to get home and let all our friends know you're OK!"

" I'm afraid my dears, you AREN'T going home." Swoop said, his voice soft and dangerous, "On the contrary, you two are going to be joining me and my friends at S.T.I.N.G. as a token of thanks for my services."

The two sisters broke up the hug and stared at Swoop in disbelief. What was he talking about? What was S.T.I.N.G.? They soon got their answer for the eagle continued.

" S.T.I.N.G. is an organization that is very much dedicated to one cause…to bring Eggman's legacy to fruition." he explained, "You two came to me to get a treatment from me so now in return, you two will now work for S.T.I.N.G. Clove, you in particular have a VERY special job. You will be part of a group that our leader, Scorn, is formulating. He calls it "The Elite" and so far, we have four members. He hopes to have eleven or twelve and he thinks you will be a very good candidate for The Elite. You two are now S.T.I.N.G. agents and I would recommend NOT trying to resist or protest against this otherwise there will be very strict punishments for you."

Clove and Cassia both gasped in horror. Swoop was working for an organization…that wanted to bring Eggman's legacy to fruition?! They both knew all too well who Eggman was and had been thrilled when news had been delivered about his death many years ago. Eggman was somebody who sickened them and they absolutely hated the times they had been roboticized when Eggman had roboticized the world on two occasions. They had hoped never to hear that evil name again. And yet here was this crazy eagle, daring to tell them that they now WORK for an organization that worships Eggman?! They were not having any of it. Cassia leapt off the table and clenched her fists.

" You're out of your mind if you think we're working for S.T.I.N.G.!" she snarled, "Clove didn't get me better just so you could make us your slaves!"

" Me and Cassia are walking out of here right now and you will be arrested for trying to enslave two innocent people!" Clove growled, "This isn't a clinic, it's a front for your evil Swoop and we're gonna get this place shut down before you subjugate any other innocents!"

" Oh I wouldn't do that if I were you…" Swoop purred sinisterly, not even fazed by the deer's threats, "Otherwise Cassia will do something she'll regret doing. Initiate Programme Override Number 626!" he barked.

As soon as he said those words, something strange happened. Cassia's eyes glowed red and she stood still as if she was suddenly frozen. She didn't move. Clove gasped in horror and stared at her sister, waving a hand in front of her face worriedly.

" Cass? Cass?! What's wrong?" she asked, "Are you OK?"

" Cassia, grab Clove by the throat and strangle her." Swoop ordered.

Cassia responded to the order immediately, raising her arms and closing her hands around Clove's throat. The deer cried out as she was strangled by her sister. Cassia didn't show any emotions as she was doing this, almost as if she wasn't even aware of what she was doing. Clove tried to get free from her cyborg sister's grip but Cassia's hands were too strong for her. She was helpless, gasping for breath as she was throttled. The evil eagle laughed a sadistic laugh of pleasure as he saw his handiwork paying off.

"Genius isn't it Clove? The cybernetics contain a programming that allows me to control Cassia as if she's just a puppet dancing on my strings." Swoop sneered, "Once I initiate the programme, Cassia belongs to me and is helpless to resist my control. The best part is though, the programme shuts off all her memories so whenever the programme is shut off, she will NEVER remember anything she does under my control! I can make her kill you now and she'd have no idea that it was her who did it. I could even make her maim and wound you and again, she'd have no idea that she did those things to you. Isn't technology amazing my child?"

" You…bastard!" Clove cried out, a voice hoarse and strained from the strangling.

" Swearing will get you nowhere Clove." Swoop sneered, "Now then, if you want to survive, I suggest you apologize for the way you've spoken to me and accept your place in S.T.I.N.G. Say those words and I'll allow Cassia to release you."

Clove stared into her sister's emotionless, blank, red optics, desperately trying to remain conscious as her air supply was depleting. Cassia would kill her if she didn't do anything now. She couldn't let this happen, not when it meant that Cassia would never get a better life without her to be by her side to help. She hated having to do this but she had no choice. She had to give-in to the feathered fiend's demands.

" OK…OK! I'm sorry! I'm s-sorry I was r-rude to you and C-Cassia's sorry too! W-we'll accept our lives as S.T.I.N.G. agents!" Clove rasped weakly, "Please, just please get Cassia t-to s-stop strangling me!"

" Do you swear that you'll be loyal to S.T.I.N.G. and will not attempt to betray us under any circumstances?"

"Yes, yes! I swear! You h-have my word! Now p-please make her stop!"

Satisfied with this, the eagle grinned as he looked over at Cassia.

" Release her." he ordered.

Cassia obeyed, opening her hands and freeing Clove from her grip. The deer collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath and rubbing her throat. She hoped that she would never have to experience this again. Swoop stood over Clove and leaned close to her ear, the deer scowling as she felt a feathered hand close around her shoulder.

" You will tell Cassia that the two of you have no choice but to join S.T.I.N.G." he purred, "You will NOT tell her about the programme in her cybernetics. If you breathe a word about this to her, I will order her to snap your neck. Do I need to make myself any clearer?"

" No. You were quite clear enough." Clove growled, "I swear though if you harm my sister, I'll show you no mercy!"

"Cassia will be quite safe my child." the scientific bird promised, "As long as you cooperate, she will keep her freewill and no harm will come to either of you two. Welcome to S.T.I.N.G., I do hope you enjoy your time with us."

He then stood up and walked away from the two ungulates, seemingly going to leave the room. Clove remained on her knees, still rubbing her neck as Swoop walked away. Just as he left the room, the eagle turned around and said:

" Shut down Programme Override Number 626."

As soon as he said that, Cassia's optics stopped glowing red and changed back to yellow and she began moving again, the light in her optics simulating a blinking action as if she'd just snapped out of a daydream. Swoop closed the door and locked it, intending to keep the deer sisters trapped in the room until it was time to take them to S.T.I.N.G. headquarters. Cassia looked down at Clove, wondering what was happening.

" What happened? It was like…I dunno, I shut off for a moment." the cyborg wondered, "Clove, what's going on? Oh my god, what happened to your neck?!"she cried out, noticing the hideous mauve bruises that Clove had around her neck.

The deer wasn't sure what to say. She couldn't even speak for a moment. All she could do was stare at the floor, wondering if it was spinning or still, and take in everything that had happened. The man giving her the number, the appointment, the operation and now being forced against her will to join S.T.I.N.G.! God, she wished she'd never met that man now! Why hadn't she refused his offer?! Clove was so overwhelmed that she could no longer stay conscious. She lay down onto her side and mercifully passed out…

Now…

It was a chain of events that Clove couldn't possibly have foreseen. All of this had happened and it had all started with Cassia's allergic reaction. How could a simple allergic reaction have led to this? Fate had many paths that many people took in the road of life that lay ahead of them and nobody could predict what paths they would take and what would happen when they took those paths. Clove stared at the picture, running a hand over it as if this was all the joy she had left in her. The pleasant memories the picture contained were all she had for comfort in dark times like this.

A single tear trickled down Clove's cheek and splashed down onto the picture. It had landed right under the Clove in the picture's eye, making it look as if the picture of herself was crying with her. Clove couldn't keep it in any longer, the dam in her body finally bursting.

"Oh Cass…why did I allow all of this to happen?! WHY?!" she wailed.

She collapsed down onto her knees, dropping the picture onto the floor and lowering her head into her hands. She sobbed and howled, her hands slightly muffling the sound of her tears. She cried and cried, feeling that no matter how hard she wept, she would never run out of tears to shed. Nobody was here to hear her sorrows, it was just her and her own tears…or so she thought.

Despite telling Cassia to leave, the cyborg sibling had stayed by the door, curious to see what would happen now Clove was alone. She had hoped that she would find out what was going on with her sister. She could see she was very upset and could only wonder what it was that was making her so sad.

"Oh Clove…I wish you'd just tell me what's wrong…" she whispered, turning away and leaving, not daring to disturb Clove as she let out all the grief she had inside of her…

This was quite possible the most depressing chapter I've ever written for a story. :(

Well, now you know why Cassia and Clove are in S.T.I.N.G. Will they ever be able to get out of it? The future will decide on that as the story continues. For now, tune in next time as the Pronghorns are ordered to "Capture Sonar" in the next mini chapter...

Mini Chapter: Capture Sonar

15 Years Later Mini Chapter: Capture Sonar

If there was one thing about working for S.T.I.N.G. that Clove hated more than anything else, it was having to do a task for them. She hated having to kidnap innocent people and bug them or to sabotage something important that an R.F.S. team was developing. No matter what it was that S.T.I.N.G. wanted her and her sister to do, Clove knew for a fact that she would hate it. S.T.I.N.G. operated against Clove's moral standards and beliefs. To her, a duty for them was like working for the devil himself. The Pronghorn could only sigh as she approached the door that led into Scorn's private quarters. Just a few weeks ago, Clove and Cassia had been informed that they would be carrying out a kidnap operation once Swoop had fixed the problems with the robo-roaches that had led to the Royal Fighters de-bugging Tails before he had gotten married. Clove assumed now that it was time to carry out the mission. Why else would she have been summoned like this?

The door split into two and opened up with one side sliding into a top corner and the bottom half slid into a bottom corner. Clove stepped inside, taking a gander at her surroundings. The room was blood red in colour, even in the lighting, and full of banks of computer monitors that displayed various sights of the base and the outside. If the devil's pit had an appearance, chances are it would look like this, that was what Clove thought as she approached the man in charge of S.T.I.N.G. himself. Scorn was watching a monitor that was showing him a room that was occupied by a robotic echidna head with tentacles who appeared to be working on some kind of machine. He didn't appear to realize he was being watched, something Scorn approved of. That was what made him such a scary man to work for. He sat up in his private quarters watching his comrades all day long and many of them had no idea he was keeping a close eye on them. Clove knew about this and this was one of the many reasons why betraying S.T.I.N.G. would be a lot

easier said than done. She hoped that Scorn hadn't been watching her crying earlier, her eyes looking a little red and the fur under them darkened by the tears. Scorn turned around and gazed at the ungulate standing before him, his black visor as dark as ever.

"You um, summoned me master?" Clove said, trying not to sound nervous.

"It is time Clove. It's taken a good few weeks but Swoop has managed to fix the problem with the robo-roaches." the Robian scorpion announced, "Once they go in a person, they stay dormant now so nobody will ever detect them again."

"I wish I could say I'm glad to hear that Scorn but me and you both know that'd be a lie." the deer muttered bitterly.

"I don't care how you feel about this Clove. All I care is that you remain loyal to us and don't even attempt to double-cross us." Scorn warned, "We wouldn't want your sister to have your blood on her hands would we?"

Clove flinched, trying to keep her anger in check. She managed a small scowl as she turned back to the roboticized Eggman cultist and spoke again.

"So you want us to kidnap Sonar the Hedgehog. I suppose it'd be pointless of me to ask why?" the pronghorn inquired.

"All you need to know is Sonar can be useful to us Clove." Scorn replied, "You and Cassia will carry out your task and if you fail, I'll have Cassia pin you down and beat you as punishment." he growled, no hints of mercy in his voice whatsoever.

"I know, that's always been my punishment for failing..." Clove sighed, "When do you want me and Cassia to depart then?"

"Right away." Scorn answered, "I trust you two have a plan to carry out this capture?"

"Of course master. Since when do I ever carry out a task without a plan?" Clove retorted, "I thought you of all people would remember that I was once in the military and served as a soldier before I had to retire to look after Cassia. I was commended for my strategic thinking by my superiors during my time in the army. That was why you even wanted me in the first place, the fact I never do anything without planning it out first."

"Yes, your military background was why we recruited you and has served us well in our cause..." the robo-arachnid purred, "Very well then, you may depart. And remember...Cassia will turn very nasty if you dare try to get out of it."

"I know, I know!" the ungulate S.T.I.N.G. elitist snapped, "I don't need reminders! We'll be back with your captive and then she's yours to do with as you please Scorn. We won't fail."

Scorn nodded his approval and watched as Clove turned around and left the room. He could hardly wait to began his experiments. He'd find out what made Sonar tick and stop her from ever healing anybody ever again. Then when Sonic was targeted by him or his elite again, Sonar wouldn't be able to save him a second time...

As for Sonar, she was currently in the New Mobotropolis Hospital and seeing to a patient who had recently broken his arm in a freak biking accident. The patient, a Mobian Okapi with stripy legs and dark brown eyes, had described the ordeal as being horrific, recapping how he had zoomed down the hill at top speed and swerved to try and dodge a car that was coming towards him. The impact had left him with the broken arm that had landed him here now. Sonar was amazed he hadn't injured himself even worse than he had done. A broken arm was the only injury he had sustained in the accident. He winced in pain as Sonar gently stretched his arm out and held her hands about it.

"Ssh, ssh, it'll be OK Oliver." she whispered softly, "I'll just give you a dose of my healing power and your arm will be better."

Oliver nodded and gritted his teeth to hold his pain as Sonar closed her eyes and spread her hands. A green glow began to form and the patient stared in amazement as the glow began to get bigger and Sonar hummed softly. She looked almost like she was meditating. She spread her hands out, the glow expanding between them until it was long enough to cover the Okapi's entire arm. Then she placed her hands down on the broken arm, making Oliver flinch but he didn't cry out, still holding his pain as if worried crying out would disturb the process. The energy between Sonar's hands covered the broken arm and began to repair it, slowly and steadily like a delicate surgery being carried out. Oliver gasped as he felt the pain in his arm beginning to fade. Sonar hadn't even finished yet and it was already going! After a minute had passed, Sonar lifted her hands away and the glow disappeared. The process had been done, another successful healing session carried out. The nurse hog smiled as Oliver flexed his arm, amazed at how the magical ability had fixed it so well. It was as if nothing had happened.

"Damn, you're good!" he cried, "My arm's all better! Oh thank you so much Sonar!"

"Anytime Oliver." Sonar replied modestly, "It was my pleasure helping you out. The energy will still be in your arm for a while to make sure everything's repaired so please be careful for a few days. Be careful not to bang it too much or to do anything that could break it again. We don't want a broken arm again so soon after I've fixed it!" she giggled.

"I'll never ride fast again, it's slow cycling for me from now on." Oliver swore, "Thanks again miss, I'm so grateful to you for using your magic on me."

Sonar smiled with pleasure. Hearing this lovely feedback from patients was the reason she enjoyed this job. Saving lives was the best part for her but the feedback made it more worthwhile for her. How she loved making people happy by fixing their injuries and saving their lives. She couldn't see herself having any other job. With another patient dealt with, Sonar stood up and left the room, already

expecting another patient in need of her very special services. It was the one drawback to being a medic with healing abilities, the fact that many people needed your attention, especially since with that power, you could fix them quickly and have them out in no time. It was tiring but Sonar didn't mind. The lives of her patients mattered more to her. On occasion, Sonar did allow her mind to wonder and muse about certain facts about her and her power.

"If I didn't have my power, would I still be a great nurse?" the long-eared hedgehog wondered to herself, "I mean, I have the skills necessary to perform surgeries and all but I rely mostly on my power when it comes to my work. Now I wonder how efficient I'd be if I didn't have it. Would I be lackluster because I've been using my power so much I might be outta practice?"

She a ran a hand up and down one of her large ears. She always did this when she was being thoughtful or nervous. It helped her relax.

"Maybe I shouldn't use my abilities so much. That way if I had to help somebody and my power isn't enough or if I was to somehow lose it, I'd still be able to save the patients." Sonar murmured, "Maybe I could talk with Evan about it. Or maybe even his majesty the king. Sonic has a power so he'd know how to compromise so you're not too reliant on it."

Just thinking about Sonic made Sonar look down at her chest and smile as she saw the twinkling ruby necklace she now wore around her neck sparkling up at her. It shone brilliantly in the light of the hospital. Although Sonic didn't need to reward her, he had done by giving her this necklace as a token of thanks for saving his life. Weeks had passed since the weddings that nearly ended in tragedy but to Sonar, it still felt like yesterday. She had been very happy to save Sonic's life and greatly appreciated the gift he'd given her. She had shown Evan the Panda the necklace and he had been quick to tell her how much it suited her. That made Sonar think of something else, looking up as she toyed with the necklace.

"I wonder how Evan's doing." she thought, "I could go see him before my next appointment. It'll be great to come by and give him a wave."

Sonar then began to walk down the corridor, walking past other doctors and nurses who were on their way to check on other patients. She didn't get very far though. She passed a female Pronghorn who was sitting by herself and looking rather upset. The deer stood up and tapped Sonar on the shoulder, stopping the hedgehog and catching her attention. She turned around to face the woman, whom looked as if she'd been crying heavily for a good few minutes. There was something familiar about this deer but the nurse-hog couldn't quite understand why. Clearing her throat, she responded.

"Hello, how may I help you?" she asked politely.

"Are you Sonar the Nurse-Hog?" the deer asked, dabbing at her eyes with some tissues.

"Yes dear, that's me. Is there something wrong?" Sonar asked.

"I need your miracle power right away!" the deer exclaimed frantically, "My sister, she's dying from a terrible disease and if you don't come quickly, she might be finished! I keep begging other doctors for help but they're all too busy. Please Sonar, tell me you're free to see my sister, aren't you?!"

Sonar took this in with sympathy and empathy. She was used to hearing crying patients and their desperation to stay alive or for their loved ones to be saved. She wasn't going to let this pronghorn's sister die today, not while she was on a roll right now and performing adequately. Evan could wait, for now, somebody needed her attention.

"Yes of course, I'll help you miss. Can you take me to her?" Sonar requested.

"Thank you so much Sonar!" the crying ungulate exclaimed, looking more happy than she had been seconds ago, "I don't know how I can thank you for this! Follow me, my sister's quite close."

She walked down the corridor with Sonar following her closely behind. They passed more doctors and nurses on their way to work, patients being wheeled into their rooms and medical staff helping patients from place to place. It only just occurred to Sonar that this whole situation seemed a little familiar. A female deer who has a sick and dying sister. Had she heard of this before? It didn't matter now. She was already looking forward to healing this poor Mobian's sister and bringing a smile to her face. She just hoped the disease wasn't too bad or her healing ability wouldn't work. There was a limit on what she could heal with her power. The deer approached the women's toilets and opened the door, inviting Sonar inside. The long-eared hedgehog raised and eyebrow suspiciously, looking at the woman as if she was crazy.

"Um...why is your sister in the toilets?" she asked.

"She needed to go and I accompanied her but she collapsed so I had to run out and get help." the deer explained, "Now please help her! She could die any moment now!"

Sonar nodded. The story seemed credible enough, though she still couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Why had the deer abandoned her sister in the toilets? Why hadn't she carried her out and started calling for help? Wouldn't that have made more sense? But instincts took over as Sonar walked into the toilets and spread her hands. Suspicion couldn't get in the way of saving an innocent life. She closed the door behind her and looked around. The toilets were completely empty. There was nobody lying on the floor like she had expected. There was one closed door with the other cubicles open, suggesting there was only one person using the toilet right now but no signs of anybody who's collapsed. She began to stroke her ear to ease down a sense of unease that threatened to overwhelm her. What was going on here? It was as if she'd been lured here for some reason. But why?

"Hello? Is anybody in here?" Sonar called out, "Anybody in need of assistance?"

And that was when the one cubicle that was occupied suddenly swung open and the occupant leapt out, a wild smile on its face as it confronted Sonar. The nurse-hog squealed in surprise, unable to believe what she was seeing. There was a cyborg deer standing before her brandishing what looked like a pair of tonfa in her hands. The cyborg pointed them at Sonar, grinning maniacally. Sonar stepped back, her ears dropping back in fright. Was this crazy girl going to shoot her in cold blood and leave her dead and bleeding on the floor?

"Fooled you, you long-eared clot!" the cyber-deer exclaimed, "Get ready for a face full of sleeping gas!"

She squeezed the triggers on her tonfa and sprayed a huge cloud of green gas straight at Sonar. The nurse coughed and spluttered as the gas swept over her and she inhaled some of it. Almost immediately, the gas took effect and Sonar began to feel woozy. Her legs felt weak and her head felt light. She coughed heavily as she turned to the door and grabbed the handle. She tried to open it but for some reason, the door wouldn't budge. The normal deer had barricaded the door with a chair under the handle to keep Sonar trapped inside until it was time to take her away. Feebly, the hedgehog pounded on the door. Her pounding was so weak that even somebody with excellent hearing would've barely noticed the sound. The gas had weakened her so it was taking her what was left of her strength to even bang the door.

"H-help me!" she cried, "L-let me out! I-I'm being...attacked...please...let me...out..." she stammered, her eyes drooping and her voice trailing off as the black void of unconsciousness began to eclipse her.

Hey eyes closed and she collapsed onto the floor, deeply in sleep thanks to the cyber-deer's attack. Cassia waited until the gas cleared before she grabbed Sonar's wrists and hauled her away from the

door. Clove took the chair away from the door and opened it up to let herself in. Once Sonar had stopped banging, she knew that that meant her sister had successfully subdued her. Sonar wouldn't wake up for hours now she'd had a dose of the sleeping gas. Clove closed the door and approached Sonar and knelt down beside the nurse, feeling heavily guilty for having to do this to her. It made her feel sick having to do this to her but what choice did she have? She felt Sonar's pulse just to be sure she was still alive. Last thing they needed was her dying because Cassia had given her too big a dose of the gas. She felt it and sighed with relief.

"She's alive. She'll wake up in an hour or so." the deer announced.

"You know sis, there was a time where I loved your plans." Cassia said grimly, "But now...it's just sickening that your strategic skills are being used like this. What a terrible misuse of your talents!"

"I know Cassia but until we break away from S.T.I.N.G., I'm gonna have to continue misusing my talents." Clove muttered, "Have you got the bug?"

"I have." Cassia said, pulling the robo-roach out of her pocket and cringing in disgust, "I can't believe we're seriously gonna put this in her body! Eeewww! That's so gross!"

"I know Cass but we have to do it. S.T.I.N.G. will know if Sonar's not been bugged and we do not want them to punish us for not carrying out the task so let's do it." the purple-eyed pronghorn sighed.

Her cyborg sibling nodded and knelt down beside Sonar, wondering where to put the bug. She held it just above the nurse's belly-button, wondering if she should let it crawl in there. No, no matter what S.T.I.N.G. wanted, they wouldn't violate the poor hedgehog like this. She then eyed the hedgehog's large ears, nodding as she thought that'd be a good place to let it crawl into her. It would be less disgusting to let it in that way. Cassia lowered her hand and watched as the robo-roach probed at Sonar's ear with its antenna, seeming to check if it was safe to enter. It then shot forward and crawled into the

hedgehog's ear, its tiny body wriggling as it forced itself into her body. Once inside, it would stay dormant in Sonar's head until it was time to activate the programming that would begin Project: Robius. Cassia looked away, disgusted at what she'd just done. Hopefully she'd be able to apologize to Sonar for all of this.

"OK that's done, let's get outta here." she said.

"Hang on Cass, there's one thing left to do." Clove said quickly, reaching into her pocket.

She pulled out a small circular device that looked almost like a watch only more futuristic and without any way of telling time. It had a blue button in the centre that was clearly meant to be pressed for some kind of purpose. She slipped the device into Sonar's pocket, along with a piece of paper that she had attached to the device. Cassia nodded, knowing exactly what her sister was planning. They had discussed this before they had left and that was the only part of the plan the pronghorns had been happy to coin up.

"It's the least we can do to make up for kidnapping her." she said.

"Agreed. Now we can leave." Clove said, raising her wrist and pressing a button on a device she wore on it.

It was a teleporter, something that all members of the Elite Eleven carried for quick escapes and fast travel. Cassia had one too and she pressed the button on hers at the same time as Clove's. The two deer sisters disappeared in a flash of blue light, leaving no evidence that they had ever been in the toilets or even in the hospital at all...

It always seemed to be the same for people, no matter who you are or what you are. When you get knocked out, the reaction upon waking up always seems to be the same. The mother of all headaches, the blurry vision and the sick feeling that all people who end up knocked out seem to experience when they climb out of unconsciousness. Sonar grunted, screwing her face up as she

began to wake up. Her head was pounding but it would soon fade. Her eyes slowly began to open though at first, nothing was in focus. The world was a blur for a few minutes as Sonar came to. The first thing she started realizing was that she could feel something cold against her bare back and something wrapped around her wrists and ankles. What was it? She could also feel something on her mouth, leaving her only able to breathe through her nose. Was it just her feeling strange from the knockout? As her vision cleared and everything came into focus, the nurse-hog soon realized that it was nothing of the sort.

She let out a muffled gasp from behind her gag, which was a silver piece of duct-tape plastered over her mouth, as she saw that she was chained to a metal slab. Her limbs were spread out in an X shape with thick metal clamps over her wrists and ankles. She was in a dimly lit room that didn't allow her to see much due to how little light there was. Sonar was only just able to see herself and the slab she was chained to. She tugged on her limbs, trying desperately to get free. Her heart pounded as fear gripped her by the throat. Whoever had done this to her clearly wanted her alive, otherwise she wouldn't be here now. But whatever the reason was, Sonar didn't want to know. She was desperate to get free before any harm could be done to her. She pulled as hard as she could on her hands and feet but she knew it was hopeless. She didn't have a ghost of a chance in escaping her prison. The clamps were very tight and very thick. Even somebody as strong as Knuckles wouldn't be able to break free. Sonar breathed in and out deeply through her nose, wishing she hadn't been gagged for her sonic scream ability could've been helpful right now. She could see herself using it on her shackles and keeping it up until they shattered. And she noticed there was a chance in getting out of here.

If she could peel the tape off some how, her mouth would be free and she'd be able to use her sonic scream. She could see that there appeared to be a corner sticking up on the tape. Whoever had gagged her hadn't done a good job at it. She could rub her mouth against her arm and get it off easily. Sonar proceeded to do just that,

desperate to get away from this place before anything happened. She vigorously rubbed her mouth against her armpit and shoulder, making sure not to accidentally flatten the sticky-up bit so she could get it off. She managed a few rubs, which had managed to peel a bit more of the tape off, before suddenly, an explosion of light filled the room and she screwed her eyes shut instinctively.

The lights in the room had switched on and now Sonar could properly see where she was. She was in some kind of laboratory, although this one wasn't quite as stereotypical is most depictions of one. This one seemed more like a torture chamber than a laboratory with its various restraining devices and evil looking machines waiting to do goodness knows what to their victims. The sight of all of this made Sonar even more nervous. Were her captors going to torture her? She could see there was a control panel just in front of her. The hedgehog turned away, not wanting to imagine what the panel did. She then heard somebody approaching her and turned to see a green-scaled rattlesnake with red eyes and a dirty smile on her face. Fang stood before Sonar, admiring her captive with perverted glee as she ran a hand down the nurse's face.

"My, my, the deer sisters really have brought us a cutie this time Scorn..." she purred, "Sonar is adorable. That face, that scantily clad body, and especially those melons..."

Fang ran a hand down Sonar's face and down to her chest, shamelessly coping a feel and making Sonar blush with anxiety and fury. She was helpless to do anything as the reptilian villainess fondled her. Of all the people to kidnap her, why did one of them have to be a pervert?!

"So squeezable..." Fang crooned as she played with Sonar's bust, "Oooh Scorn, I'm going to have fun with this girl, I really am."

"You can do what you want with her in a moment Fang." came a voice from further away and just behind Fang, "We have work to do first."

The rattlesnake nodded and let go of Sonar, standing back so that Scorn could come forward and show himself. Sonar let out a muffled gasp of alarm as she saw quite possibly the scariest thing she had ever seen in her life. A roboticized scorpion with blood red armour and a sharp blade at the end of his tail towered over her, his black visor glinting in the light. Scorn leaned forward, making Sonar cringe and look away from him. She closed her eyes, begging for this nightmare to end. The Robian didn't seem to mind this as he introduced himself.

"Welcome to our headquarters Sonar the Hedgehog." he announced, "I am Scorn and I am the leader of S.T.I.N.G., but you probably already know that thanks to your King Sonic. We're privileged to have you here as our guest today Sonar. You see...we've heard many interesting things about you."

Sonar looked back at Scorn with fear in her eyes. She had a nasty feeling that she knew where this was going and prayed upon hope that she was wrong.

"Lyra the Leech managed to control the Royals of Soleanna and get them to attack Sonic while he was weak." Scorn explained, "Through them, she saw you fight and use your sonic scream ability to fight them off. That is why we have sealed your mouth shut, we cannot let you use that scream on us when there's delicate work to carry out." he added, motioning to the tape on Sonar's mouth, "Also, Lyra managed to get Tails to tell us that you saved Sonic's life with a magical healing ability. I am not one to believe in magic but Lyra managed to mind-control Tails and make him spill his secrets so I cannot doubt his word for a second."

Sonar gasped a muffled gasp again. She wasn't wrong, she now knew why S.T.I.N.G. had kidnapped her. They wanted her for her power no doubt! She began to struggle furiously, more desperate than ever to get free. Scorn ignored her and walked away towards the control panel.

"We want to know the secret behind your power Sonar, so that way, we can remove it and prevent you from ever saving Sonic's life the next time we try to kill him." the robo-scorpion said, standing behind the control panel and pressing some buttons on it, "Brace yourself, this may hurt a little."

Sonar watched with fearful eyes as the ceiling opened up and something began to descend down from above. It looked like a giant gun of some kind with a long circular barrel and a huge hydraulics system that allowed it to move up and down. It hissed loudly as it descended and pointed directly at the captive nurse. Sonar began to feel very scared, almost wanting to cry. She could imagine the gun firing at her and doing goodness knows what, maybe even killing her. But the machine was not in fact a gun, but a highly sophisticated scanning device. Scorn had built it for operations like this for any kind of information could be vital to S.T.I.N.G.'s cause. He had wondered if he could use it on Sonic one day and find out the secret behind his super speed. Scorn pressed a button and the machine fired a crimson red scanning beam directly at Sonar's exposed belly. The nurse winced and writhed around as the beam hit her. It felt very painful, almost burning as it slowly crawled down her skin. She wanted to cry out but her gag stopped her. For a whole thirty seconds, the beam ran down her belly before finally, the process was complete and it switched off, leaving Sonar panting and gasping behind her gag, relieved it was finally over.

Her belly felt as if it was on fire. She looked down and was glad to see there weren't any nasty marks left behind, or at least any that were clearly visible. Sonar also noticed that she'd been sweating throughout her meeting with Scorn and Fang and as it had trickled down her face, it seemed to be weakening the adhesive on the tape. It felt less restricting and her mouth was able to move ever so slightly. The corner she had managed to peel off hadn't been flattened back down so there was still a chance she could get it of and get free. Sonar waited for the right moment as Scorn read the readings from the scanner. He seemed fascinated by the results he'd

uncovered and Fang looked over his shoulder to see for herself. She let out a surprised gasp when she read the results.

"Oh my god...Scorn, according to this machine, the nurse is full of mana!" she cried.

"And that is the secret behind her healing ability..." Scorn purred, fascinated with the result, "Yes, I've heard much about the mana. Highly sensitive Mobians can use it for good or for bad and as hard as it is for many to believe, it's all around us. Sonar's large ears would explain why she's mana sensitive..." he added, taking note of the hedgehog's large ears.

Sonar sighed despairingly to herself. The machine was totally correct and so was Scorn. Her powers did come from the mysterious "mana" that was all around though only few Mobians could ever use it like she could. Given Scorn had wanted to remove her power, she had a nasty feeling that his next move would be to remove the mana from her. This made Sonar more worried for removing mana could kill her! She had to escape now before Scorn could try to remove it from her! She began rubbing her mouth against her arm again while constantly forcing her lips up and down to try and shake the tape off. Scorn and Fang noticed this but didn't intervene. She'd never get the gag off before they removed the mana from her. Scorn pressed a button on the control panel and the scanning machine rose back up into the ceiling. As soon as it disappeared and the ceiling closed up, Scorn pulled down a lever and another section of the ceiling opened up. Another machine descended down from the ceiling, its hydraulics systems and pistons pumping and hissing as if the thing had a life of its own. This one looked like a gun once again but had what looked more like a satellite dish attached at the end. Sonar's eyes widened, knowing exactly what this machine was for before Scorn even spoke.

"We could use your power for our own needs Sonar. And we also want to keep you from healing Sonic the next time we try to kill him so we're going to have to remove your mana." he crooned, his voice devoid of any mercy or pity for the captive, "I don't know what the results will be but I do not care at this point. All I care is that your

healing abilities will be gone and you won't jeopardize assassination attempt again."

He was about to press a button to begin the process. Once activated, the machine would whirr into life and drain Sonar clean of her mana. The machine was capable of absorbing any kind of energy, even Chaos Energy, and the process was near impossible to interrupt once the machine was activated. Even if it was aiming slightly away from the victim, it would still drain them. But just as Scorn's claw came down on the activate button, Sonar made her mouth. She had managed to peel off enough of the tape so she could now open her mouth. She took a deep breath and then let it out in one terrific sonic-scream. Scorn and Fang were completely taken by surprise, hit full on by the huge sonic waves that emitted from the nurse's throat. The noise was deafening and the room seemed to shudder in protest. The machine wobbled, the force of the sonic waves turning it away from Sonar and causing a huge creaking sound to split through the air. It wasn't built to be forced around like this so it began to break, its pistons snapping loudly as the powerful scream hit it. The control panel sparked furiously, straining under the power it was being bombarded by. Scorn and Fang had both crashed into the wall and fell down onto the floor, rendered unconscious by the impact.

Sonar didn't stop screaming despite this. She turned her head and aimed the sonic-scream at her right shackle. It wouldn't do any harm to her hand and wrist but the shackle wouldn't withstand the power. It cracked under the strain and eventually shattered apart, freeing her right hand. Sonar then did the same to her left hand, breaking that shackle and freeing it. She stopped screaming for a moment so she could catch her breath and rub her wrists better. Then she sonic-screamed again, breaking her ankle shackles and freeing herself completely. She peeled the tape off, which had just been clinging to her upper lip the whole time, and wiped her forehead.

"Whew...gosh...I hope...I don't...have to...do that again." she panted, "That sonic-scream can be really...tiring when used...like that. At

least I can...get outta here...now..."

She ran towards the door and slammed a hand against the button on the side, opening it up and allowing herself to flee down the corridor. Unfortunately for her, just as she left, Scorn and Fang began to come to. Scorn was up on his feet first, standing up and shaking his head as Fang groaned and got up on her knees. Scorn turned and saw that his machine was wrecked, hanging only by its hydraulics systems and sparking furiously. It would never work again in this condition. He also saw that Sonar had escaped and he clenched his metal hands in rage. S.T.I.N.G. couldn't have yet another failure! How could they bring Eggman's legacy to life if they kept failing?! He yanked Fang up onto her feet, almost wrenching the woman's arms out of their sockets and he bellowed at her.

"FIND THAT GIRL! SUBDUE HER AND BRING HER BACK HERE **NOW!** "

Fang obeyed and quickly ran out of the room to capture the escaping hedgehog. She couldn't have got far, especially since this place was new to her. She'd never get away. She would catch Sonar, use her rattle to knock her out and bring her back to Scorn. Before that, she could probably have some fun with Sonar when she fell unconscious. Yes, that would be enjoyable. Laughing deviously, Fang ran down the corridor with her beady eyes open for any signs of Sonar.

As for Sonar, she had run down a couple of corridors, moving quickly so she could put as much distance between herself and her captors as possible. She doubted that Fang or Scorn would be able to keep up with somebody who could run at 300 mph. But Sonar skidded to a halt and darted around a corner, realizing something that put her at a grave disadvantage. She had no idea where she was! This place was unknown to her, she'd never been here before. How was she possibly going to find a way out in this strange place. Her heart pounded in fear and she tried to keep herself calm. Panicking wouldn't get her out of here, she had to remain calm or she'd never escape.

"Keep it together Sonar old girl...just keep calm." she told herself between breaths, "I'll find a way out, there's always a way out. I'll find it eventually."

Then she realized something that she hadn't quite noticed before. She could feel something against her thigh. That was odd, she didn't have anything in her pockets usually. What was going on? Sonar reached into her pocket and pulled out a small device that she'd never seen before. What on Mobius was it? She'd never had anything like that in her pockets before. She didn't even know what it was.

"What in the world...?" she stammered, "How did this get there? What is it exactly?"

She then saw that somebody was clearly on her side in this for the device had a piece of paper attached to it. Sonar turned the device over so she could read the paper. What she read took her completely by surprise. It said, in very neat handwriting:

Sonar, I am somebody who works for S.T.I.N.G. but somebody who has no desire to help them in their goals. I am on your side. This device you now hold is a teleporter. I smuggled it out of the base to put in your pocket so you could escape. We do not wish for you to be a prisoner of S.T.I.N.G. Keep the device so the Royal Fighters can use it to bring S.T.I.N.G. down. It's simple to use, just imagine where you want to go and press the button. Trust me, you'll be out in no time.

Anonymous

Sonar couldn't believe her eyes and her luck at the same time. So S.T.I.N.G. had a traitor in its ranks did it? That was good news. Maybe S.T.I.N.G. wasn't all evil after all. The traitor was on her side and helping her escape! Whoever Anonymous was, Sonar hoped she could thank him or her in person one day. She owed Anonymous her life for this.

"And to think today was taking a very bad turn." Sonar said to herself, "I bet King Sonic will be happy to hear S.T.I.N.G. has a traitor among them who's managed to help me escape this place."

She turned the device back other and thought about being back in New Mobotropolis. She wanted to be back there more than anything so she could tell the king and queen what had happened. They would want to know about this. Sonar closed her eyes, still thinking of home as she pressed the button on the teleporter. She now began to wonder if this was some cruel joke and S.T.I.N.G. had given her this device to trick her into thinking she could escape when in fact, the device did nothing. But then Sonar felt a huge sensation surging through her as a blue light engulfed her. She was about to cry out in surprise before she vanished into thin air, leaving no trace of her existence behind. Seconds later, Fang arrived at the spot where Sonar had just been and looked around to see nothing in sight. She pressed on, still searching for the hedgehog. As soon as she'd left, a door that had been open a crack closed fully shut before anybody noticed it was even open. Clove had been watching the whole thing and was glad to see that Sonar had listened to the note and used the teleporter to escape. The best part was, this corridor didn't have security cameras so S.T.I.N.G. would never know that she had teleported away.

Clove turned to Cassia, who was eager to hear the news.

"So, did Sonar do it?" Cassia whispered.

"She did indeed." Clove replied, "She managed to break free and she found the teleporter in her pocket. She's escaped."

"Alright!" Cassia cried, punching the air, "It sure was lucky that Scorn entrusted us with binding and gagging her eh? Leaving a corner of the tape sticking up so Sonar could peel it off easier was a great idea of mine!" she preened, tapping her metal head as if she was some kind of genius, "Nobody can plan better than the deer sisters!"

"And that is why S.T.I.N.G. will come to regret ever forcing us to join them." Clove muttered.

She could hardly wait for the next opportunity she and Cassia could get to cause S.T.I.N.G. some problems from behind the scenes. They would have to be careful so as not to give the game away but they wouldn't stop plotting against them. They'd break free eventually and then Clove could see to it that Cassia's programming was removed so S.T.I.N.G. couldn't make the cyborg deer attack her again. Once that was done, they'd be free at last...

The teleporter had worked exactly as Clove knew it would do. Because she'd been thinking of New Mobotropolis, Sonar had been whisked back to the city thanks to the hi-tech device. Sonar was relieved to see the familiar houses, grass and stone paths of the city again, preferring this much more than where she had just been moments ago. She put the device back in her pocket and ran off towards a nearby house that had a crown logo on the door. This was where Sonic the Hedgehog and Sally Acorn were currently living while Castle Acorn was being rebuilt. Sonar could see that rebuilding had started already though it would take a long time before the castle was restored to its former glory. The house was bigger than most other houses in New Mobotropolis and far more luxurious, more like a small mansion than an actual house. It was a place for the king and queen to stay should the castle end up damaged or destroyed like it had been a while back.

Sonar rapped on the door frantically and waited until somebody answered it. It was the beautiful Princess Zoe the Hedgehog, the daughter of Sonic and Sally, who opened the door. She smiled brightly at the sight of Sonar.

"Why hello there Sonar!" she greeted sweetly, "How lovely to see you!"

"Thank you your majesty." Sonar said, curtsying, "Are the king and queen in right now?"

"They sure are. They were just about to start making lunch before you knocked." Zoe answered, "Come in, they'll be happy to see you."

Sonar sighed with relief. Thank goodness she hadn't missed them! She walked inside and followed Zoe as she led the nurse into the kitchen. Sonar could see right away that Sonic and Sally were about to start preparing a chicken salad. Sonic was slicing some bread and Sally was slicing the chicken, which had just been cooked. The smell was wonderful and made Sonar feel a little hungry but she ignored her stomach for the time being. She waved politely as Sonic and Sally looked up from their lunch and smiled at her.

"Well, well, if it isn't the woman who saved my life!" Sonic cried, "We weren't expecting guests for lunch Sonar."

"There's plenty to go around so if you want, you can join us. We don't mind." Sally said, placing a chicken leg onto a nearby plate.

"Oh I'd love that your majesties, thank you." Sonar said, curtsying once again, "But first, I've got some very important news for you two. It's urgent!"

Sonic's quills stiffened. He could tell from the look on the hedgehog's face that she looked like she'd been through something scary. She looked frantic and even a little exhausted. He put down the bread knife.

"OK then, fire away. We're all ears." he inquired.

Sonar recapped everything that had happened to her from being gassed by a cyborg deer to waking up in S.T.I.N.G.'s lair and being scanned by them. Sonic and Sally had been horrified to hear that they had tried to drain her power and that Fang had molested her but were glad to hear about how she had escaped. They were very happy to hear that she'd gotten out herself and before S.T.I.N.G. could steal her power.

"One would think those guys would know how to gag somebody." Sonic snickered, "They actually left a bit of tape sticking up? No wonder you managed to rub it off with your arm! They were practically begging for you to remove it!"

"I dunno Sonic, do you think they did that on purpose?" Sally wondered, "I mean, what if they WANTED Sonar to escape?"

"I don't think so your highness." Sonar replied, "You see, I was given this teleporter by somebody who calls him or herself Anonymous."

She paused as she took the teleporter out of her pocket and put it on the table to show the royals. They stared at it incredulously, amazed that Sonar actually had it on her now.

"I didn't have anything in my pockets before I was gassed and yet I woke up and as I'm running through the corridors, I felt this in my pocket and it had a note attached." the long-eared hedgehog explained, "The note says that Anonymous is a S.T.I.N.G. agent but actually is on OUR side. He or she gave me this teleporter so I could escape. Anonymous wants to hinder S.T.I.N.G.'s plans from behind the scenes, hence why he or she gave me this and told me to keep hold of it so we could use it against them."

Sonic, Sally and Zoe all took this in with deep surprise and delight. How wonderful it was to hear that S.T.I.N.G. had a traitor among them! It was nice to see that not everybody in that organization was bad. If they ever met this Anonymous person, they'd give him or her their sincerest thanks for being on their side and wanting to help stop the evil Eggman cultists.

"That'll show S.T.I.N.G. not to mess with us!" Zoe declared, "One of their own is working against them! In their faces!"

"At the same time, this doesn't mean Sonar is safe." Sally noted, "S.T.I.N.G. might try to kidnap her again. They want to remove her power so she can't save Sonic again next time they try to kill him and

they likely won't stop until they do. So I'm afraid that Sonar's in grave danger for now."

"What are we gonna do?!" Sonar exclaimed, tugging her ears, "I don't wanna get captured again! What if I'm not so lucky next time and Anonymous can't help me? I'll be drained of my power and killed because of it! I can't be drained of my power or else I'll die! S.T.I.N.G. will kill me if they succeed! We've got to do something to keep me safe from them!"

"You said it nurse." Sonic agreed, "That is why I'm gonna allow you to stay with me and my family until S.T.I.N.G. are no more. We've got room to spare so don't worry, you'll be quite comfortable with us." he said brightly, "We'll protect you Sonar. It's the least I can do in return for you saving my life after all. You saved me so now we're gonna save you."

"Oh your majesty, you really mean that?!" Sonar cried, putting her hands to her face in delight.

"Your king has given his word, and he always keeps his word." Sonic winked.

"Welcome to our family Sonar. You'll be made very welcome with us." Sally promised, "S.T.I.N.G. will never get you again."

"If they try to get you, we'll kick their asses!" Zoe declared.

Sonar's face broke into a smile so wide that she almost looked like a Cheshire Cat. Her eyes brimmed with tears of joy as she hugged the hedgehog family with gratitude for their generosity.

"Oh bless you! Bless you all!" Sonar cried, weeping happily, "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me! Thank you so much!"

"Don't mention it nursie!" Sonic replied, "Now then, care for some chicken salad? We've got enough for four." he offered.

"Oh yes please, I'm absolutely starving!" Sonar cried, putting a hand on her stomach, "Must have been all that sonic-screaming and running building up an appetite."

"Well you may take a seat while we serve up." Sally said, picking up her knife so she could cut more chicken.

Sonar obeyed, seating herself down at the dinner table with Zoe sitting down next to her while the king and queen finished preparing the meal. Today had been the scariest day of her life, but Sonar was too happy with her escape to care about that. She had made it out alive, she was away from S.T.I.N.G. and above all, under the best protection anybody could ask for. Today had definitely ended perfectly and the nurse was all to thankful to Anonymous for helping her get away.

She could only wonder what Anonymous's next move would be and what it would do to S.T.I.N.G. next time he or she struck. Maybe it'd bring them down for good. Sonar hoped so. She never wanted to see or hear from that organization again. And yet unknown to her, there was still a bug inside of her, waiting to be activated when the time was right. She would be in S.T.I.N.G.'s power again, and she had no idea about what was to come...

And that's it for this mini-chapter! Sonar's escaped and Cassia and Clove are in the clear...for now.

Tune in next time as we begin the "Valuable Relics" arc, an arc starring everybody's favourite spike-fisted echidna...KNUCKLES! :D

Valuable Relics: Prologue

15 Years Later Chapter 3: Valuable Relics

Prologue: Parental Guardians

Downunda, a year after Enerjak's death…

Anybody who happened to visit the country of Downunda in this day and age would never have guessed that there had once been a floating island that once loomed in the sky just above the country for many years. Such a thing would even be considered hard to imagine for some. The only tell-tale sign that there had been even the slightest possibility of a floating island was the huge crater that had been left in the ground after said island had taken flight. And that crater was now being filled up, making even that speck of evidence disappear from the world. The crater wasn't being filled for no reason. It was being done because it was the only thing they could do with what remained of the floating island that had once existed.

Angel Island had once been a wonder that many people of Downunda came by to gaze at and admire for the many years it had existed. Kept afloat by an amazing gem known as "the Master Emerald", Angel Island had levitated above ground and remained as such for as long as anyone could remember. Of course, a precious gem like the Master Emerald needed protecting as any theft of the emerald meant disaster for the island. So there had been a tribe of guardians who had watched over the Master Emerald for many years. The last such case was the only guardian currently alive at this point. The rest of them had been slaughtered by the maniacal Imperator Ix, a madman who had wanted to ground Angel Island and take the Master Emerald for himself. That guardian was one of Sonic the Hedgehog's closest friends, and one he often liked to tease and banter with. His name was Knuckles the Echidna, and he was hard at work at this current time.

Knuckles had first met Sonic during the early stages of the Eggman War. Eight months into its first year, Sonic had taken Tails to Downunda and the two had visited Angel Island only to then find themselves having to help Knuckles find the Master Emerald after it had been stolen by Rouge the Bat. Despite a rough start, Knuckles would soon befriend Sonic and play a part in many of the hedgehog's adventures, as well as helping to fight against Eggman and face off against his own personal enemies from time-to-time. The echidna was so-called due to his trademark spiked knuckles, which made him a heavy hitter and an effective brawler. His punches had smashed many an Eggman robot and given many opponents he'd faced against a concussion. He suffered from an ill-temper and was known to be gullible at times, though he had proven harder to fool in later years. He had taken over from his father, Locke, after he had died protecting the island from Imperator Ix and had stuck to his duties VERY faithfully. Not a day passed where he put any duty above protecting the Master Emerald, only ever leaving it in dire situations. Even in that case, he would always make sure somebody was protecting it in his stead while he was gone.

Sadly, those days had come to an end when Dr. Eggman had stolen the Master Emerald during his nefarious scheme to roboticize Mobius with a powerful battle station known as the Death Egg. Because the Royal Fighters had all been occupied at the time, nobody had been around to protect the enormous emerald and thus, it had been stolen along with the Chaos Emeralds. The island had fallen with nothing to keep it afloat and had become a broken pile of rubble that looked more like a bunch of ruins than an island. The loss of his home had been hard for him. It was as if a large part of his life, literally and figuratively, had been taken away from him. And now, he was tidying away the last parts of Angel Island so that the mess it had become would no longer be intrusive or ugly to anyone in Downunda. The only logical thing to do was to tidy the island pieces away into the crater Angel Island had risen from. Knuckles thought that they could then cover it with earth and soil and let some grass grow over it to make a beauty spot that would mark where Angel

Island was now buried. At least he could make something beautiful out of the island's remains.

It had been a long process, mainly due to the fact the work had been on hold when he had taken part in the battle against the Dark Armada in the year 2144. Knuckles's uncle, the nefarious Dr. Finitevus, had led the army and carried out an insidious plot that saw him becoming the destructive, power hungry Enerjak, a Chaos Deity that corrupted those who became him. Enerjak had come close to destroying Mobius but Sonic had put a stop to that by becoming Hyper Sonic and using the power of the Master Emerald, the 8 Chaos Emeralds and many artificially made Chaos Emeralds against him. The world had been saved and Enerjak had been destroyed, leaving Knuckles with some resolution that his evil uncle would no longer menace the world. Ever since the Armada's defeat, he had gone back to Downunda to clean up the remains of Angel Island and also deal with the large number of Chaos Emeralds he now had thanks to Finitevus creating a lot of artificial ones for his plan. 109 Chaos Emeralds was too much to watch over for him, the artificially created ones reminded him bitterly of Dr. Finitevus and the fact there was a large number left open the risk that Enerjak could return, so he had them promptly destroyed and any fragments remaining buried along with Angel Island. That way, it would be impossible for anyone to become Enerjak ever again. He had smiled grimly as he buried the last remains a week ago, feeling as if he was wiping away whatever remained of his uncle. Now there were only eight Chaos Emeralds left, just as it should be. There had once been seven, but they had required an eighth one from the Black Arms after they had invaded Mobius a couple of years back. It had once been black, but had been restored to its natural white colour when freed from Black Arms corruption.

The eight Chaos Emeralds and the Master Emerald were still in Knuckles's possession now and he was going to decide on what to do with them once he'd finished with Angel Island's remains. He pushed hard against one last chunk of debris that needed to be thrown into the crater, straining hard but managing to shift it as he

pushed. Much of the debris had been broken down into smaller pieces to make it easier to push, carry or bury over the time he'd spent cleaning it up. Now the job was almost done at last. Knuckles pushed on the debris piece, shifting it closer towards the crater with every step. In a matter of minutes, he'd finally got it to the edge of the crater and gave it one last mighty shove as it toppled over and rolled over the debris pile that was already there. It came to a stop and somebody walked up to it with a pair of blades in hand to cut it down to size. The red echidna watched as the Mobian swiped at the debris chunk several times with the blades, reducing it to smaller pieces of rubble and then neatly arranging it around the debris pile to tidy it up. The work had been done and the crater had been filled at last. Angel Island was now to be buried and become a part of nature itself. It saddened Knuckles to see his old home now a pile of rubble in the crater. But he knew that he couldn't dwell on the island's destruction forever. It was time to move on and start a new generation of guardians with a new home to watch over the emeralds from. He looked over to the Mobian who had helped him tidy up the remains of his home as it climbed out of the crater and headed towards him.

"Finally got it all done Shade." the guardian said, "I thought we'd never clean it all up!"

"Now the remains are tidied away, Downunda won't have a pile of rubble disrupting its natural beauty." Shade agreed, "It'll look even nicer when we grow some grass over it but we can wait for that. It doesn't have to be done now."

Shade was an echidna also, and she had once been an enemy of Knuckles due to being a member of the Nocturnus Clan and the daughter of Imperator Ix. But she hadn't enjoyed being a part of her father's schemes at all. She hadn't even enjoyed growing up with him either. The former clan member had been abused throughout her childhood by Ix and she'd lived in fear of him all her life, the only reason she even served him at all. That had all changed when Knuckles had convinced her to betray him and help the R.F.S. take

Ix down. Since then, she and Knuckles had grown close and had even fallen in love with one another. Shade was eternally grateful to Knuckles for inspiring her to get out of her father's shadow and be free of his tyranny. That was among many reasons she'd fallen for Knuckles. This love was also the reason why she'd been hard at work helping Knuckles to tidy away Angel Island's remains.

"It almost feels as if I'm burying my family legacy. I wonder what my father would've thought if he saw this…" Knuckles murmured, his face falling as he felt a small twinge of guilt creep over him.

"I think he'd be happier that Finitevus is gone and the power of the emeralds didn't end up causing the end of the world." Shade reassured her boyfriend, "I think he'd overlook this situation and be thankful for that. I admit that I didn't really know your father well so I could be wrong…" she suddenly thought, feeling annoyed that she was now being unhelpful by mentioning this.

"Whatever his thoughts would've been, it's irrelevant now." Knuckles declared, "Angel Island's gone, that's all there is to say about it. At least I can carry on his legacy by continuing my duties as guardian. Island or no island, the Master Emerald will remain in my protection."

"And I will remain by your side to keep watch over it." Shade declared, "So where will we keep the emeralds? We can't just watch over them with no place to keep them."

"That, you're right on." the emerald watcher agreed, "I had thought about that for a while now actually. I knew that once Angel Island was buried away, we'd have to consider the future of the Chaos and Master Emeralds. Downunda is a big place so we'll easily find somewhere to keep them."

"And then? Will it just be us watching over them in that new location?" the armoured echidna asked, "I have no doubt we're more than qualified to guard the emeralds but my time in the Nocturnus Clan has told me there is strength in numbers. I suggest we start a whole new generation of guardians, have more than just us guarding

the emeralds, and thus we don't have to make it just our responsibility. It'll take a load off our shoulders, plus it'll free us up for any time the Royal Fighters may need us."

Knuckles pondered over the suggestion for a moment. He couldn't see anything wrong with Shade's idea. Why not have more guardians? The current generation had been wiped out by Ix, but there was always the possibility they could start anew. He was sure he could find any possible descendants of the former guardians who might be living in Downunda or at the least, find anybody willing to take on such an important task. A whole new tribe, that was what they needed! A tribe to guard the emeralds and carry on the legacy that he himself was carrying on!

"I like that idea!" Knuckles cried enthusiastically, "We could create our own tribe of guardians and protect the emeralds through them! It'll be just like the days of my father again and the emeralds will be safer with more of us watching over them."

"I'm glad you agree my love." Shade said with a soft smile, "We could name this tribe after you. "The Knuckles Tribe". I like the sound of it, it makes us sound tough and ready for battle."

"Knowing Sonic, he'd say something stupid like "Gee Knuckles, sounds like you're making your own fan-club here!" if he heard this right now." Knuckles snickered.

He knew his speedy friend all too well and could easily imagine what jokes he'd be making if he was around to hear this.

"Speaking of Sonic, I wish we hadn't been so caught up in our work." Shade said grimly, "It would've been nice if we could've attended his and Sally's baby-shower and congratulate him on the wonderful news he's soon to be a father."

"We'll just have to give him our congratulations later." Knuckles decided, remembering the letter he had received from the hedgehog telling him the wonderful news, "Gotta say I'm happy for him. The big

hero of Mobius himself is gonna have a kid! I pray to the Ancients she'll not turn out like him though! One super-fast jokester is enough!"

Both he and Shade chuckled at the remark. Despite saying such a thing, Knuckles was secretly excited about the idea of his friend having a child and was looking forward to said child's birth.

"Before we go and see him though, I'm in the mood for something to eat right now." Shade put in, "I'm starving!"

"Again?" Knuckles asked curiously, "It's only been a couple of hours since we just had lunch Shade! You can't seriously be hungry again!"

"Knuckles, would I say I'm starving if I was kidding?" Shade snapped, "When I say I want to eat, I MEAN it! At the very least, I could maybe have a bit of a snack to keep me going until its dinnertime." she suggested, rubbing her stomach.

Knuckles shrugged. As long as Shade didn't want dinner too early, he couldn't see anything wrong with her having a snack. But he had to wonder why she seemed to be getting hungry so soon. This wasn't like her at all. Shade was never much of a big eater and certainly didn't build up an appetite this quickly! Later on, he'd take her to New Mobotropolis so Nicole the A.I. Lynx could scan her for any possible abnormalities. But first, he'd go and satisfy his girlfriend's hunger pangs.

"Alright then, we'll go eat." he said casually.

So he and Shade had gone back to the temporary home they'd been living in during the whole clean-up process. The small house they were occupying was just big enough for them and had all the amenities they needed from a bed to sleep in to chairs to sit on and enough food to keep them going day-by-day. They had rented the place so they could stay close by to the ruin site as they had been cleaning it away and were intending to move out and get their own place once it was done and let somebody else rent the house.

Upon arriving home, Shade had gone straight over to the fridge and had started helping herself to a pot of cheese spread that she spread on some crackers she'd gotten out of the cupboards. She also had a handful of nuts and a tin of sweetcorn to go with it. A rather big snack to eat when it hadn't been so long since they'd eaten lunch. Knuckles had watched as his girlfriend devoured the lot, gobbling the goods as if she hadn't eaten for a weak. She barely even paused between chomps before shovelling something else into her cheeks. If anybody saw this, they'd have thought that Knuckles was hardly feeding her, or at least that she was hardly feeding herself! To finish it off, the she-echidna washed it all down with a bottle of soda. She wiped the corners of her mouth with her hand, surpassing a burp to keep it from coming out.

"Much better." she said with relief, "But I really don't get this. Why do I seem to keep needing to eat lately?"

"I was wondering that too my love." Knuckles concurred, "You're many things, but an eating machine isn't one of them! You've been doing this for a few days lately. Are you sure everything's OK?"

"Well aside from the odd hunger pangs, I feel fine." Shade said, running her hands over herself, "But the hunger pangs themselves are not normal. I think I need a check-up to make sure I am fine."

"I thought so as well." the spike-fisted echidna agreed, "Shall we go to New Mobotropolis and ask Nicole to run a diagnostic scan on you?"

"I wouldn't want to trouble her, not when New Mobotropolis is no doubt congratulation Sonic and Sally on the news of Sally's pregnancy." the ex-Nocturnus member said thoughtfully.

"I still insist we go now." Knuckles said firmly, "The sooner we work this out, the better."

"If you insist handsome." Shade shrugged, "Let's go see Nicole."

Glad that they had come to an agreement, Knuckles took out a warp ring that he often carried with him and flicked it into the air while simultaneously picturing Royal HQ in his head. Warp rings were miracle items, able to transport the user to wherever they wanted to go with just a flick of the ring and a thought of where to go. They were also useful to use in a fight, as Dr. Finitevus had proven in his many uses of warp rings during the times they'd fought. The warp ring opened, creating a Bridgeway from Downunda to Royal HQ while sparkling brilliantly with gold flashes. Knuckles and Shade went through it, the ring closing up behind them, vanishing in a bright golden flash. There was no evidence that it had ever been there as it disappeared.

New Mobotropolis: Royal HQ, headquarters for the Royal Fighters Service…

Nicole had just left Castle Acorn to leave Sally Acorn in peace. She had attended the baby shower with the other girls in the R.F.S. to congratulate her best friend on the news and the exciting development of becoming a mother. Little did she know was that she would be receiving visitors as her holographic avatar settled down in Royal HQ to watch over the place and make sure everything was in working order. The lynx heard the sound of a warp ring opening up just as she was ready to work and she turned to see Knuckles and Shade step through it and into Royal HQ. Her face lit up with delight. It had been a while since she, or anyone in New Mobotropolis, had seen the two echidnas so it was good to see them again. The warp ring closed up behind them and Knuckles caught it as it shrunk down to size, storing it back away by slipping it around one of his dreadlocks. He glanced around the room he was in, pleased to see the familiar sight of Royal HQ around him. It still felt like yesterday since he'd last been here, yet it had been a good few months since then.

"Good to see the place hasn't changed a bit." he commented more to himself than anybody.

"Hello Knuckles and Shade." Nicole greeted politely, "What a pleasure it is to see you both."

"Greetings to you Nicole." Shade replied with a polite bow, "How have you been?"

"I've been perfectly well." the Mobian-turned-A.I. replied, "I've just been attending Sally's baby-shower. All the girls were so happy to hear that she's soon going to be a mother! You should've seen all their faces!" she added, laughing.

"I think I would've loved to have seen Sally's face most of all." Knuckles snickered, "I hope she didn't feel too over-whelmed."

"Truth be told, I thought she was gonna faint at one point." Nicole said with a half chuckle, "Heh, heh, to think she's fought against machines, mystical beings and a Chaos-god yet being surrounded by girls excited about her becoming a mother is what makes her feel uneasy."

She coughed, deciding to change the subject.

"So how goes things in Downunda?"

"We just finished clearing away what's left of Angel Island." Knuckles explained, "The crater it had risen from is now full of its remains. We're hoping to have some grass grow over it to hide it all."

"But we're not just here to give you an update on our lives." Shade admitted, deciding to just get to the point, "Could you give me a quick scan? Both Knuckles and I have noticed that I seem to be getting hungry a lot more than I used to. It's been happening for a few days and we wondered if you could see if anything's wrong with me at all."

Nicole nodded. It hadn't been that long since she'd given Sally a scan due to the queen complaining about feeling sick in the

mornings. Now she was needed to give Shade a scan. Would it turn out the same way as when she'd scanned Sally?

"Have you experienced any other oddities aside from hunger pangs?" the lynx asked curiously.

"Well Knuckles did noticed that I seemed to be a bit snappier than usual too." Shade admitted, thinking back to another day where she had been uncharacteristically grumpy and had snapped at Knuckles a few times, "We dismissed it at the time as Knuckles is used to me having the odd moment or too."

"Hmm...bad moods plus hunger pangs...I think I have an idea on what could be wrong with you." Nicole murmured, "But I'll scan you anyway so there can be no doubts. Stand still if you please, this'll only take a second."

Shade obeyed, the armoured echidna not moving an inch as the digital Mobian scanned her. A green beam leapt out of her eyes and ran up and down Shade, slowly as if measuring every inch of her and making sure it missed no details at all. It started from the top over her head and travelled down to her feet, then all the way back up again. Once she'd finished, the beam retracted back into her eyes. The first thing Nicole did after completing the scan was smile a wide, excited smile. That made Shade curious. What on Mobius could she be smiling about?

"Well? Am I OK?" she asked, "Nothing I should be concerned about?"

"You two are NOT going to believe this..." Nicole whispered, the excitement in her voice still evident despite talking quietly, "And what a coincidence it is too! Sonic and Sally are going to be parents soon and now you two are as well!"

A long minute of silence hung in the air as Knuckles and Shade took in what Nicole had just said to them. At first, they weren't sure what she had just said. Then it clicked in and Shade clasped her hands

over her mouth in astonishment. Her eyes were so wide with amazement that they could've popped out of their sockets.

"Y...y-y-you...you mean I'm...I'm..." the echidna stuttered. She could barely even say the words.

"Yes, you're pregnant too!" Nicole exclaimed, "You're gonna be a mother just like Sally Shade! Congratulations, both of you!"

Now it all made sense to the two echidnas. Of course it was pregnancy! What else could it have been?! A common side effect of pregnancy was feeling hungrier than usual and having low moods and Shade had displayed both symptoms. Still, it did feel a little sudden and the couple weren't sure how to take this. Shade could feel tears of joy trickling down her cheeks but she just stood there, her body paralyzed with a mixture of shock and amazement. Knuckles looked as if he was going to faint. Neither one moved for a while, causing Nicole to feel concerned and she decided to ask them a question, more to break the silence than anything.

"What's wrong? Are you too OK?" she asked nervously.

That seemed to wake the two up for Knuckles shook his head and Shade blinked several times. It looked as if they'd just come out of dreamland for a minute.

"It's fine Nicole...really it is." Shade said quietly.

"We're just surprised...and very happy." Knuckles added, his face breaking into a broad smile of pleasure, "Isn't this amazing Shade?! We're gonna have our own kid!"

"It's incredible." the peach-coloured Mobian agreed, "And to think it came so soon after Sonic and Sally found out they're gonna have a kid too!"

"I can only imagine what Sonic would have to say if he heard this. He'd never let me hear the end of it!" the red-furred echidna said,

half-laughing as he said those words, "Do you think we should tell him and everybody else the good news?"

"I think you should wait you two. We just got over the excitement of Sally having a baby!" Nicole giggled, "Maybe wait a day or two, or however long you feel you need, and then give out the news. Don't worry about me, I won't tell anybody until you're ready." she added with a wink.

"Thanks Nicole." Knuckles said appreciatively, "I think it might be best if me and Shade return home now so we can adjust to this development and start planning ahead for our baby's arrival. Tell Sonic and Sally we said "congratulations" by the way." he added quickly.

"I'll let them know you've heard the news and that you're happy for them." the lynx said, "I'll see you both later. And once again, my sincerest congrats to you both!" she finished, grinning excitedly again.

"Thank you Nicole." Shade said gratefully, "I'm looking forward to when our baby is born..."

She put a hand over her stomach and smiled happily. To think that she and Knuckles were going to be parents! And it seemed oddly appropriate considering they had just been talking about formulating a new Guardian Tribe to watch over the emeralds. With nothing more to say, Knuckles opened up the warp ring again, the golden ring expanding large enough for he and Shade to fit through and opening up a Bridgeway from Royal HQ back to their rented house in Downunda.

They stepped through the warp ring and were instantly transported back home, the ring closing up behind them as they stepped out of it. Once it had closed, Knuckles stashed the warp ring away in his dreadlocks again and both he and Shade sat down on the sofa together. The two allowed themselves a moment of silence to further let the news settle in while Shade was slowly rubbing her stomach

as if she could already feel the baby that was growing inside her right now. As sudden as this pregnancy was, she couldn't keep herself from feeling overjoyed. Her own child at last! And to think she and Knuckles had yet to get married!

"Oh Knuckles, I never thought this day would come. We're going to be parents!" Shade exclaimed, "We'll have a child of our own and we can teach the child how to be a guardian just like we are!"

"I was thinking something like that too." Knuckles said, smiling approvingly, "And this also fits in with all our talks of wanting to begin a new tribe of guardians to protect the emeralds. Our baby can be the start of that tribe!"

The excitement in his voice was unmistakeable as he said that.

"How right you are handsome." Shade nodded, glancing at her stomach again, "With our strengths and experiences, our child will be a great guardian and will carry on the traditions of the original guardians just as we are right now."

"But are you sure we're cut out for this?" Knuckles asked.

He had slowly moved on from the excitement that comes with pregnancy and was now feeling the usual twangs of anxiety that comes with such news. Shade could even see it in her boyfriend's eyes that he was feeling unsure about this and waited for him to continue so he could let it all out.

"I mean, we're guardians and we're part of the R.F.S.! We protect the emeralds and save the world from whatever comes our way!" the spike-fisted echidna cried, "We don't know much about parenting! I've certainly never given parenting a thought at any point in my life! What if we end up being bad parents because of it? We might not be the right people to raise a child! What are we gonna do?!"

He took a moment to let his nerves settle as he could feel himself getting too overly agitated. Shade looked at him with sympathetic

eyes, understanding her love's worries. The thought had crossed her mind too and she felt a similar way. But she wasn't going to let those worries spoil the wonderful news that she was going to have a baby. She put an arm around Knuckles comfortingly. The peach-coloured echidna could feel her red-coloured partner trembling against her as she embraced him.

"Don't worry about all that Knuckles." Shade said softly, "I know we're not really the ideal couple to raise a child but that can change. I bet you never thought Sonic would become a dad and here he is now with his own baby on the way! If he can become a parent, I'm sure we can too."

"But I don't really know how to raise a kid." Knuckles muttered, "That's the worrying part. Breaking jerk's faces, I can do! Stand and guard the Master Emerald for days and days, I can do! But being a dad? That's something new altogether! I never learned about that!" he fretted, pulling on his dreadlocks in exasperation.

"Maybe you could try doing what your father did to raise you." Shade suggested, "I'm not seeing to be exactly like Locke, but you could at least follow his examples of parenting. That is, if you have any memory of how he raised you. I know I wish I had no memory of how my own father raised me…" she growled savagely, horrible images of Imperator Ix abusing her flooding back into her memory. She cringed and shook her head to try and get the images out.

"Well obviously I won't follow HIS examples." Knuckles retorted, "Ix was no father to you, just a tyrant who deserved to be imprisoned in the void forever. As for my dad…" he paused as he thought back to his childhood, "I do remember how he would often play with me, showing that he knew how to have fun and not put duty above everything. He would teach me how to fight, how to use the power of the emeralds and the histories of the guardians. Of course, he'd discipline me if I ever misbehaved, but I never recall him being particularly harsh about it. And of course, he'd often shower me with love and make it clear how much I meant to him…"

He stopped for a moment to regain himself. Just talking about his father was making him well up and he fought hard to choke back the tears. Even now, he still missed him terribly and found it hard not to feel tearful when he brought up Locke. Shade softly patted his back to help him feel better. She only wished she could talk about her own father in such a sentimental manner like her boyfriend could. At least Knuckles had a decent father and she could feel happy for him he had that privilege growing up. After a minute had passed, Knuckles lowered his hands and breathed in deeply, letting it all out again in a content exhale.

"I'm OK now." he said, "Sorry about that, talking about dad just… does that to me."

"It's alright my love." Shade insisted, "Hearing you say all that was quite charming really. Your father sure did sound like a wonderful man. True he did have his own shameful secrets to hide but at least he was a great parent to you."

Knuckles nodded, knowing what his girlfriend meant by that. He had been told that there had been thousands of Chaos Emeralds originally and that they had been fused together to make seven. But Sonic had discovered that there were huge clusters of Chaos Emeralds hiding in a cavern below Downunda after a fight with his evil brother, Scourge. It had turned out that those clusters had been hidden there because Locke wanted to bury an old shame of his as the clusters had been responsible for a tragedy under his watch. Knuckles had felt annoyed to hear his father had lied to him this whole time but that hadn't changed his views on him at all. He supposed if he'd been responsible for a terrible event, he would've wanted to hide it too.

"That he was." the red guardian agreed, "And I'm gonna try to be a great parent to our kid like he was to me. I may not know much about parenting, but we're gonna make this work Shade! I swear it!"

"Heh, that same level of determination you have when protecting the emeralds. I always liked that about you." Shade giggled, playfully

fingering her boyfriend's chest.

"There's a LOT of things you like about me." Knuckles snickered, "So…we're guardians and now we're soon gonna be parents. We're gonna have a lot of things to do to prepare ourselves for the baby's arrival."

"Maybe we could do what Sonic and Sally did a year ago and finally get married." Shade said, "Then we can lay down the foundations for our planned tribe and prepare for our baby. It's gonna be a lot of work, but I feel it'll ultimately be worth it in the end."

"And I'm happy that we're gonna be doing all of this together beautiful." Knuckles said, his voice warm and tender as he pulled Shade closer to him.

The proud parents-to-be embraced each other and kissed, feeling their love for each other resonate between them. There were going to be some stressful times ahead, as is expected for anyone who's about to become a parent. But as far as they were concerned, there was nothing to worry about. All the troubles in the world seemed to be gone for Knuckles and Shade as they kissed and cuddled together. They had a long wait until their baby was finally born, but they were already looking forward to when it happened…

Nine Months Later, a few weeks after the birth of Princess Zoe the Hedgehog…

It was time at last. After nine months of waiting and preparations, Knuckles and Shade were about to receive their child. Shade had woken up in the night in absolute agony and Knuckles had been quick to take her to the hospital, believing that she was going into labour. Shade believed he was right, feeling that the baby was coming. The nearest hospital to the echidnas was the Downunda Medical Centre, a top medical facility in Downunda that was highly recommended for patients in the country due to its high hygiene ratings and very efficient staff. They had gone there, using a warp

ring to deliver themselves there quickly, and a doctor had come to see Shade immediately to help her deliver the baby.

In the time that had passed since Shade's discovering she was pregnant, she and Knuckles had of course delivered the news to the Royal Fighters of New Mobotropolis. They had received a reception very close to what Sonic and Sally had received when they had revealed they were going to have a child. Everybody had been happy for them and congratulated them on becoming parents. Knuckles had requested to see Sonic alone so he could tell him about his insecurities about being a parent. He had braced himself for the inevitable jokes Sonic would make, but the king hedgehog had actually restrained himself and had been serious and sympathetic towards him.

"I had similar thoughts myself when Sally told me that I was gonna be a dad!" Sonic had cried, "I'm the Hero of Mobius, I never once considered being a parent!"

"So what did you do about it?" Knuckles had asked.

"I went to see my own folks about it. They were very helpful in giving me ideas on what to do and how to be a parent." Sonic replied, "I guess I could give you their advice to see if it'll help you too."

And the king had done just that, recapping what his parents had told him to give Knuckles some ideas on how to be a dad and what to do when raising a child. Knuckles had taken that into accountant and still had it on his mind even now.

A couple of months later into Shade's pregnancy, the two echidnas had finally decided to marry so they could raise their child as a married couple. They had intended to get married for a while and now felt like the right time for them. The wedding had been a very traditional one with an ancient dress-sense and a ceremonial vibe to the whole thing. It was the kind of weddings the Old Guardians had whenever they wedded anyone and Knuckles wouldn't have had it any other way. All their friends had attended and watched happily as

the echidna couple were deemed husband and wife. Once the wedding had been over, Knuckles and Shade had begun laying down the foundations of their planned tribe. They had settled on the name "Knuckles Tribe" as they couldn't think of any better name to give it and had started off by finding a place for the emeralds to be kept. After that had been done, they had built a house of their own to live in and had done so not far away from where the emeralds were being kept. That way, they could live peacefully in their home and remain close to the emeralds.

The house they had built was big enough for a family of three to occupy and looked very old fashioned with nothing all that modern in it aside from central heating and plumbing. Knuckles had wanted the house to look more like something the Old Guardians would've lived in than something more like today's standards while having the necessary modern additions. There was no technology of any kind around, not even a television to watch. Both Knuckles and Shade had agreed that they would raise their child in as traditional a way as possible, no technology at all. But they wouldn't keep her away from it in general, knowing that they would love to let their kid meet Nicole at some point.

And now there they were, in the hospital and waiting for their child to be born. Knuckles had wanted to stand by Shade's side as she gave birth but the she-echidna had decided against it. She didn't want Knuckles in too much of a state and felt it would be better if he waited. So Knuckles was sitting on a chair, waiting to hear from the doctors if the baby had been born yet. His face was white as a sheet and his nerves were jingling. If somebody could find a picture that would perfectly go along with the word "anxious", Knuckles's face would've been that picture. He was clenching his fists together as if trying to crush his own hands and was trying to keep himself under control. He wished he could've been beside his wife now to hold her hand and try to comfort her as she went through the agonizing pain of labour. Instead, he was here trying not to have a nervous breakdown in the middle of a hospital. God, had he known childbirth was THIS nerve-racking, he would've made sure he and Shade

weren't going to have kids! Did Locke feel like this when his mother gave birth to him all those years ago? If so, Knuckles could only wonder how he coped with it all.

The echidna was in such a worried state that he didn't even hear the sound of footsteps approaching towards him and a voice calling to him. He was eventually brought out of his panicked state when the voice calling to him reached out and touched him on the shoulder. Knuckles flinched instinctively and was about to yell at the person touching him but quickly realized it was only a doctor. The doctor was a Mobian Kangaroo and he was looking down at him with a friendly smile. That made Knuckles feel more at ease. A smiling doctor always meant good news.

"G'day mate." the kangaroo said in a thick Australian accent, "Just wanted ta let ya know, yer wife's just successfully given birth. She wants you to come see yer child right now."

All the anxiety that Knuckles had felt seemed to disappear upon hearing the wonderful news. His baby had arrived at last! He was officially a father! At this point, Knuckles was tempted to just scream with excitement and run around the room. But he instead kept himself composed and shook the doctor's hand.

"Thank you for telling me this." he said.

He then walked straight into the room where Shade had been taken to give birth with the kangaroo following him. As soon as he entered, he saw a very exhausted but smiling Shade looking at him with glee in her eyes. In her arms was a tiny baby echidna with beautiful red fur and beige stripes around its dreadlocks. The stripe colour was repeated on the tips of the dreadlocks too. The baby, which was wrapped up warmly in a blanket as Shade held it, also had the most adorable purple eyes that matched Knuckles's own. Seeing the baby made Knuckles feel giddy all over and he came closer so he could have a proper look at it. Shade glanced down at the baby, cooing at it softly.

"That's your daddy right there." she whispered, "He's very keen to see you."

The baby looked up at Knuckles as if trying to figure out who he was and if it liked him or not. Knuckles held out one of his huge hands and smiled with pleasure as the baby touched it with its own hand. The first bit of contact made between father and child and it felt wonderful to Knuckles.

"Our own child…and its gorgeous." Knuckles said softly, "I think this maybe the best day of our lives!"

"It's a girl." Shade revealed, "The doctors told me the moment they got it out."

"We have a daughter!" Knuckles exclaimed, "Funny considering that Sonic and Sally's new-born baby is also a daughter. Sonic would think we were trying to copy him or something!"

"Ha, ha, yeah, probably." Shade chuckled, "I thought of a name we could give her. I quite like…Sadie." she said, glancing down at the adorable baby echidna she was holding.

"Sadie. Hmm…that sounds nice." Knuckles agreed, "Sadie it is. Welcome to the world Sadie." he added, smiling with pleasure at his new-born daughter.

Sadie only babbled in return, still clutching her father's hands. The echidna couple couldn't be happier with their child. It had come out healthy and beautiful and they were already looking forward to beginning its life as a new guardian, as well as the first new member for the Knuckles Tribe. They both knew that this baby was going to achieve great things just as they had as it grew older, just like Sonic and Sally's very own daughter…

How wonderful isn't it? Knuckles and Shade now have their own daughter. And she'll grow up to be a guardian just like

*them! ^^*

I know many of you Archie fans will start making "Mobius: 25/30 Years Later" comparisons now though given it's Knuckles with a daughter in a series that takes place in the future. XD Rest assured, Sadie will NOT turn out like Lara-Su! Unlike Ken Penders, I happen to know what I'm doing when it comes to writing so I can avoid the mistakes he made when he created that character.

Speaking of Sadie, she is a character created by my DeviantArt friend: DarkCattheKhajjit, and was used with his permission. Special thanks goes to him for allowing me to include her in this story. :)

Next time, we get to see the Knuckles Tribe and how Sadie copes with being the daughter of a guardian as she begins to grow over the years in "Part of the Tribe" so see ya then! :D

Valuable Relics: Chapter 1

15 Years Later: Chapter 3: Valuable Relics

Chapter 1: Part of the Tribe

Downunda, The Knuckles Tribe, five years after Saide's birth...

The next few years had been very busy for the echidna family. After Sadie had been born, Knuckles and Shade had been keen to introduce her to everybody in the R.F.S. as soon as possible. The first people to see her had been King Sonic and Queen Sally, who at the time had been at home in Castle Acorn looking after their own baby. It still amused the two echidnas to think that their daughter had been born merely a few weeks after the new princess had been. Having their kid be born so close to one of their friend's couldn't have been more coincidental. Knuckles and Shade carried Sadie into the throne room, where Sonic and Sally were sitting with the infant Zoe sleeping peacefully in a bed beside them. Sonic and Sally approached them eagerly, already buzzing to see their friend's newborn daughter.

"Here she is your majesties, our little Sadie." Knuckles announced, holding the tiny echidna out for them to see.

Sonic and Sally looked down with awe in their eyes, touched by how cute the baby echidna looked. Sadie was unaware of this, just snoozing contently in the blanket she was wrapped up in.

"Aww, look at her!" the queen chipmunk cooed softly, "She's adorable!"

"Yeah, I think Zoe might have some stiff competition." Sonic snickered.

"Very funny." Knuckles muttered, "Me and Shade are so happy right now! We were gonna start a new tribe to watch over the emeralds in

Downunda and our little girl's the first new member!"

"I hope many more will join after her." Shade put in.

"I bet she'll grow up to be as great a guardian as you two." Sonic said kindly, "Kinda like how we feel Zoe might become Mobius's next hero after yours truly."

"I've thought of that too, but we don't wanna put too much burden on Sadie's shoulders." Knuckles said hastily, "We want her to still have a normal childhood...if that's even possible given who her parents are." he added, not realizing how awkward that sounded until a few seconds after he'd said it.

"Um, you know what I mean right?" he asked feebly.

"I do." Sally said, "We don't want Zoe to grow up with a massive ego and think she'll be as amazing as her father. We will train her to be a fighter and hone her abilities, if she has any, to her potential but we still want her to have a proper life and get a chance to be a kid while she can. It'll be hard given she is a princess and the daughter of Mobius's biggest hero but we will try."

"As will we for Sadie." Shade agreed, looking down at her with tender eyes, "I hope our daughters will become great friends too as they grow older."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they end up like me and Knuckles, always trying to one-up one another and heckling each other but still buddies through and through." Sonic said with an amused grin on his face.

"I can't wait for that." Knuckles sneered, smiling sarcastically.

After Sadie had been introduced to the entire R.F.S., the echidna family had returned to Downunda to settle down and get Sadie used to her own environment for the next few months. A year later, the Knuckles Tribe had started to build up. Many echidnas from around

the country had heard of Knuckles and Shade's plans and some of them had liked the idea so much that they'd wanted to join up and be a part of it. Many of the tribesman had liked the idea of being able to guard the Chaos and Master Emeralds, remembering the stories of the previous tribes that had watched over them, including Knuckles's late father, Locke. It had been a slow and steady process but the tribe was beginning to grow. A village had been erected to accommodate the tribe and provide living spaces for them all. The village itself had a very rustic appearance to it with traditional houses, stone walls to keep invaders out and a lot of art on display be they totem poles or pictures displayed in their homes. Anyone walking by would feel as if they'd stepped into a time portal to a few hundred years ago. Knuckles had always been traditional and wanted the tribe to reflect this.

Of course, he wasn't foolish to think that that would be enough to handle the ever-evolving world of technology and villains who were hi-tech in nature like Eggman and Finitevus had been so he had allowed Shade and any of the more technical members of the tribe to provide the village with computer equipment and some security measures to keep an eye on the tribe and better handle intruders. The additions gave the village a very unique appearance as the sort of habitat that had a middle ground between traditional and modern and the tribe had taken to it very quickly.

The Chaos and Master Emeralds themselves had been placed in a new location, their placing being the deciding factor in where the village would be built. After roaming Downunda for a while, the echidna couple had come across an abandoned set of ruins that looked like the remains of an ancient palace, presumably from one of the old tribes. Despite seeing it as desecration, they had knocked the ruins down and built a new shrine from scratch to display the emeralds on. Now there was a beautiful shrine standing proudly on a hilltop with the Master Emerald in the centre and the Chaos Emeralds dotted around it. After that had been completed, the rest of the village had followed from there. Sadie had been introduced to the shrine when she had turned three. The curious echidna had been

mesmerized by the pretty colours and bright lights of the emeralds upon seeing them for the first time.

"Wow...they're so shiny..." she murmured, her eyes wide with intrigue.

"They're not just shiny my girl." Knuckles had told her, "They're the most powerful gems in the world. And it is OUR sacred duty to protect them. You'll learn more as you grow older."

And now at the age of five, Sadie was beginning to receive training from her parents to be the next guardian and to find her place in the tribe. She was sitting on the floor in her house with her parents as they began teaching her important philosophies of life and what being a guardian truly meant.

"Now, Sadie, one of the first things you need to learn about being a guardian is patience." Shade said, "While it is always likely that someone may seek out the Chaos and Master Emeralds, you must remember to always appreciate peace and harmony, for it is what we always strive to ensure."

"A wise guardian never seeks out war." Knuckles agreed, "Those who do don't appreciate the small things; things that really matter. Nevertheless, you must also be prepared to fight if and only if it is necessary."

"To start off with, we begin with a meditation." Shade said to her daughter, "Learn to connect with your surroundings and be mindful of your mind and body. Then, we will move to training in combat. Understand, sweetie?"

The infant Sadie wasn't going to understand all of this right away but it seemed she had taken everything in that she'd heard. Her parents noticed her just sitting there looking thoughtful, her beautiful purple eyes far away as she considered her answer.

"I think I do." she replied, "I really look forward to the fighting though! I get to punch things like daddy does!"

She sprang onto her feet and throw some punches, trying her best to mimic her father's moves. Shade looked over at Knuckles suspiciously, her arms folded. Her husband stared at her, trying to look innocent.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Knuckles protested, pretending he didn't know why.

Shade just shook her head. Trust Knuckles to not keep his fighting prowess hidden until the time was right! Regardless, she had been quick to start Sadie on a meditation exercise. It wasn't easy as one doesn't simply expect a child to just sit still like that as children are over-excitable, over-energetic little scamps who would much rather run around and play all day than sit in one spot and meditate. Shade knew this and did her best to keep her patience as she made Sadie sit still, fold her legs and close her eyes. Sadie grew reckless very quickly, constantly fidgeting or getting up to try and do something else only for Shade to grab her back and put her back in place again.

"Mom, do we HAVE to do this?!" the next-gen guardian whined, "This is boring!"

"It might be at first, but trust me, you'll soon learn to appreciate how soothing and peaceful an exercise this can be darling." Shade said, being careful not to raise her voice and keep her temper, "If you can learn patience, your training as the next guardian will be on the right path. You do want to be like us, don't you?"

"More than anything mama!" Sadie piped.

"Then please take this seriously and try to follow along." her mother replied.

Sadie closed her eyes and tried to relax.

"Now, take a slow, deep breath in through your nose." Shade said, "Inhale to a count of 5."

"1, 2, 3..."

"I mean, in your head, sweetie; count in your head as you breathe in."

"Oh, right."

"Once you reach 5 in your head, hold your breath for a count of 2, again in your head, and then, let it out through your mouth, to a count of 6."

Sadie didn't see much point in any of this but decided to follow her mother's instructions anyway. She doubted that she'd tell her this stuff for no reason. Sadie inhaled through her nose, counting to five in her head, and then held her breath for the count of two. She then exhaled through her mouth, her mind counting to six as she did so. As the last of her breath exhaled, the young echidna found herself feeling strangely at ease. It was like all the energy inside of her was starting to settle and it felt quite nice in a way. A warm feeling began to spread through her body, a wave of contentment sweeping from her head down to her toes. She repeated the exercise several times, Shade watching her with approval as she could see her daughter was getting into this. It sure didn't seem like she found it boring anymore. After ten minutes of meditating, Sadie finally opened her eyes, looking up at her mother.

"Am I doing this right?" she asked curiously.

"Absolutely. Every bit of it dear." Shade said with a soft smile, "And you carried it out for a whole ten minutes. Were you enjoying this?"

"I quite like how it was making me feel warm and fuzzy inside, like everything around me is coming to a standstill and I'm one with the earth." Sadie explained, "It was wonderful!"

"See, it's not as boring as you thought it would be." the former Nocturnus Procurator said, "If you keep this up, you'll master one of the most important traits of being a guardian."

Sadie beamed with delight. How she longed to be a guardian like her parents and she was on her way to mastering what it meant to be one! She could hardly wait for the glorious day to come when she would stand by her mother and father as the newest guardian of the emeralds.

She had found herself enjoying the meditation despite thinking it was boring at first, but Sadie really enjoyed the training matches with Knuckles and any member of the tribe that was a skilled fighter. There was something about action and fighting that always sent a surge of adrenaline running through her that exhilarated the guardian's child and made her eager to start swinging. One of her first training matches was had with a woman named Julie-Su, one of the Knuckles Tribe's newest members who had just joined a few months ago. Julie-Su was a pink echidna with purple hair and dressed in a teal and black tank-top, black trousers and teal thigh-high boots. One of her most distinguishing features was one of her arms and one of her dreadlocks were replaced with robotic ones. When asked about it, Julie-Su had only said that it was a result of the Eggman War and didn't want to expand on that.

"Talking about it brings back gruesome memories..." the pink echidna had said.

Knuckles and Shade understood this and didn't press on further, advising Sadie to do the same so she wouldn't upset Julie-Su. Sadie was close to Julie-Su, seeing her as an honorary "auntie", something that made the she-echidna happy. It was an honour for her to be considered an auntie to the daughter of a guardian. Julie-Su showed both Knuckles and Shade why she was fit for the tribe by blocking every move Sadie threw at her with expert accuracy and precision. The child was beginning to get frustrated as she threw several punches and kicks at her auntie figure but she never once hit her mark. Julie-Su was too fast and skilled for her. Sadie leapt into the

air and swung a roundhouse kick at Julie-Su's head. She merely ducked, a smug smile on her face as her opponent missed yet another attack. Then she retaliated with a flat-palmed strike to the face that threw Sadie down onto the ground. The five-year-old clutched her cheek and winced, surprised at how hard she'd been hit.

"No fair Auntie-Su! You never let me hit you!" she wailed.

"Sorry Sadie, but that's not how things work in a fight." Julie-Su said grimly, "Your opponent will NEVER play fair. Nobody in a battle ever lets their opponent hit them. If you do so, you've lost the battle before you even begin. In a fight, you have to be strong, quick and pragmatic. If you can be all of those, you'll be as powerful as your parents in battle and no threat will ever get past you."

"I'll be stronger, faster and more pragmamic than everyone in the tribe!" Sadie declared excitedly.

"Not with an ego like that, you won't." Julie-Su teased, "And it's pronounced "prag-MAT-ic"." she corrected.

"What does that word even mean?" Sadie asked.

Julie-Su could only chuckle as she helped Sadie back to her feet and prepared to resume training with her. Knuckles and Shade watched as the two echidnas began to spar again, admiring how dedicated Sadie was to honing her skills. At the same time, they began to worry a little about her.

"Do you think she's getting TOO much into this?" Shade asked with concern.

"I guess she's taking more after me than you." Knuckles agreed, "Seeing how stubborn she is, I'm beginning to realize how everyone around me must feel about MY obstinance!"

"Heh, well she throws punches about as much as you do." Shade observed, watching as Sadie tried to punch Julie-Su in the face but missed as her opponent dodged, "And she's not one to give-up easily, just like you."

"True. It's like I'm looking at a child version of myself at times." Knuckles remarked, a slight chuckle to his words.

Knuckles was very right to call his daughter that and this, little did he know, would cost her dearly.

One day, Sadie was sitting alone, quietly meditating. She breathed in to a mental count of five, held it to two and then exhaled to six. She was so at ease with the world around her that she didn't hear someone sneaking up behind her. Then...

"Yoink!"

Sadie felt something slide over her head; that and the sudden voice made her jump so much, she tumbled off the rock she was sitting on. Sadie lay on her back for a moment, dizzy and confused with the sudden disruption of her mindful state.

"What's... What's the big idea?!" she said at last, staggering to her feet, "Don't you know it's rude to-?"

She stopped when she realised that something was missing from around her neck: a necklace her mother had given to her for her fifth birthday.

"Looking for this?" said the snide female voice she'd had heard a few moments before. Sadie looked by and saw a female squid with pale green skin and purple eyes. She was holding the necklace in one of her tentacles.

Sadie glared at the thief. There was already something she didn't like about this squid. The horrid little smirk on her face, the fact she was

so nonchalant about stealing from a complete stranger and the horrible, taunting attitude she displayed as she waved the necklace in front of her like someone getting their dog to beg for a treat. The necklace was golden and studded with gems, which made this gift very valuable to Sadie and she treasured it dearly. The echidna made a grab for it but the squid held the necklace out of her reach.

"Hey! That's mine! Give it back!" she wailed.

"You have to catch it first if you want it squirt!" the squid sneered, "Oop, here it goes!"

To further add insult to injury, she began tossing the necklace from one tentacle to another, making Sadie dart back and forth to try and catch it. It was a hopeless case as the marine girl's tentacles were too long and throwing the necklace to high for Sadie to reach. Every time she tried, one tentacle would just grab hold of it and then throw it to the next one. Sadie was quickly beginning to wear out, unable to get back her beloved gift as the squid kept throwing it to-and-fro.

"What's the matter wimp? Not able to catch it? I thought you wanted it!" the purple-eyed girl taunted, "You can't want it back THAT badly then!"

She laughed tauntingly, making Sadie even more furious. Her fists clenched and her eyes narrowed to a savage expression that, if looks could kill, this would've had the bully stone-dead before she could say a word.

"Look, stop being a jerk already and give it back!" Sadie growled, "You should know that you can't take things that don't belong to you!"

"Says who?" the squid retorted, "Your mommy and daddy perhaps? Ha! Who needs stupid parents when you can live life as you please and take what you want! The necklace is MINE now and you can't do shit about it!"

"I'll have you know, barnacle breath, that I'm the daughter of two guardians who run their own tribe!" Sadie snapped, "They're training me to be as great a guardian as them so if you don't give me back my necklace, I'll punch your face off!"

"Oh I'm SOOOOOOOOO scared!" the sea-Mobian cried in feign fear, "I'm gonna be attacked by the daughter of some tribesmen! Why don't you just do yourself a favour and run off home to whatever tent you crawled out of, "guardian girl"!"

The squid came to quickly regret that for if there was one thing in the world that angered Sadie more than anything, it was derogatory remarks like that. Nobody EVER got away with racist assumptions that the Knuckles Tribe all live in tents simply because they're tribesmen. Everybody in the tribe took discrimination very seriously and never let it slide. She also hated how the squid had used the term "guardian girl" as an insult as that felt like a cruel stab to the very heart of herself. With rage driving her on, Sadie stormed up to the squid and threw a punch that surprised even herself as to how hard it had been. It was quite clear that fighting lessons with Julie-Su and other tribes members were beginning to pay off. The echidna's eyes widened as the squid reeled back, stunned by the punch and momentarily unsure what had just happened. The marine bully lost her balance and collapsed onto her bottom, clutching her face in pain.

As she took her hand away, the squid couldn't help but notice that her cheek felt a little bigger than before and all the teeth in one side of her mouth were aching. Sadie had punched her so hard that her cheek had swollen. She stood up, a look of death in her purple eyes.

"Oh, you don't know when to quit, do you?!" she snarled.

Stuffing the necklace into her pocket, the squid raised her tentacles menacingly, preparing to whip Sadie with them both. Sadie recoiled, feeling very nervous. She was in for it now, she'd kicked the hornet's nest and would have to prepare herself for a lot of stinging. But she

didn't want to give the squid any pleasure in seeing her afraid. Instead, she closed her fists and adopted a battle-ready stance.

"You're right, I DON'T know when to quit!" the guardian's daughter declared, "Hope you got an icepack ready, cause you're in for a LOT of bruising!"

"Oh I ain't gonna be the one needing an icepack you little brat..." the squid snarled.

She then lashed out with both tentacles and wrapped them around Sadie's ankles. With a single flick, she sent her spinning backwards onto her back. Sadie grunted as she hit the ground, her back flaring with pain. She tried to get back up but the squid whipped her with both tentacles. Despite her age, the squid's tentacles were surprisingly strong. She could whip with enough force to rival a punch. Sadie yelled in pain and then cried out some more as the squid whipped her again. Then she advanced closer to the poor girl and grabbed her by the neck with both hands. She jammed her face into Sadie's.

"You ever mess with ME again and you'll lie dead at the bottom of the sea!" the bully spat savagely, "Do you understand me?!"

"Go stick your head in a thorn bush!" Sadie retorted, headbutting the squid directly in-between the eyes.

"GAH! DAMN IT!" the sea-Mobian screamed, clutching her face in agony and letting go of Sadie.

It felt as if she'd been hit by a rock, showing to her that this insolent brat was no small fry like the other wimps she'd dealt with before. She took her hands away, noticing that there was blood on them. She had been hit so hard that Sadie had given her a nose bleed. That angered her even more. She glowered at her victim with so much hate that her eyes seemed to be pools of flames to Sadie.

"Oh that's it, THAT is IT!" she roared, "You are DEAD meat you little cretin!"

She pounced on Sadie angrily, pinning her down to the ground by wrapping a tentacle each around her wrists and forcing her arms down while using both hands to punch Sadie in the face. She punched her five times, bruising one of her eyes and causing her to spit blood out. Every punch felt like a sack of rocks being swung at her as poor Sadie was pummelled senselessly. The squid then picked Sadie up again and threw her against a tree as hard as she could. The five-year old hit it, crying out in pain and laying in a crumpled heap at the foot of the tree. Sadie lay there, battered and bruised and in floods of tears. She sobbed loudly, clutching her face and soaking her hands with blood and tears. The squid smirked with sadistic glee at this sight.

"Oh grow up you big cry-baby!" she sneered, "What's the matter? The wittle-bitty guardian can't handle a few punches to the face? Maybe that's a sign you're not fit to be a gradian! Your parents must be SO ashamed of you! Ha, ha, ha! Well at the very least, you've learned NEVER to mess with Abyss the Squid again!"

She strode towards the crying Sadie, her tentacles raised menacingly. Abyss was about to continue beating up Sadie until she heard voices coming. Her head snapped around as she heard someone calling out.

"Sadie! What's going on? Where are you?!" the voice called.

"Shit, guess it's time for me to skedaddle!" Abyss yelped fearfully, "Bye squirt! Thanks for the necklace!"

The cruel cephalopod took to her heels, leaving Sadie as a crying mess at the foot of the tree while she made off with her birthday present. The voice continued to call but Sadie didn't seem to hear, her sobs blocking out the sound. She was still weeping as the voices, which were Knuckles and Shade, finally found her and scooped her up quickly. They were horrified to see what had

happened to Sadie, her face a mess of bruises, blood and tears. They were quick to start panicking and frantically asking about all this.

"Sadie! By the Ancients, what the heck happened to you?!" Knuckles exclaimed.

"My poor baby, who did this to you?!" Shade shrieked.

Sadie looked up into her parents' faces, but she was too bruised and hurt to speak properly. All she could do was blubber and moan in pain. She felt so ashamed; not only had she lost her mother's gift, but she'd allowed herself to be beaten by a bully. Granted, that Abyss had clearly been at least a decade older than her, but Sadie had thought that being a guardian's daughter could enable to overcome this. She could only dissolve into more sobs, wailing into her mother's chest.

"Shh, it's okay, it's okay, sweetie." Shade whispered soothingly, stroking her daughter's back and dreadlocks, "Your mommy and daddy are here. It's okay."

"Please, sweetheart." Knuckles said, using a term reserved only for his daughter, "Tell us who did this."

Sadie continued to cry for a few more moments, before she finally raised her soaked face out of her mother's chest.

"I... I was m-m-meditating, w-w-when someone s-snuck up behind me and t-took the necklace you g-gave me, m-mummy." she sobbed.

"Your necklace?!" Shade asked, looking at her daughter's chest. She gasped when she realised her gift was indeed gone.

"Who was it?!" Knuckles said, more urgently and rather impatiently. Sadie whimpered, but she went on.

"S-some squid; said her name was A-Abyss; g-green skin, p-purple eyes. S-she insulted our t-tribe and I attacked her; p-punched her on the cheek and then, h-head butted her in the face. She got real m-mad and pinned me down and... and..."

She broke down again, but Knuckles and Shade didn't need to hear anymore.

"My poor baby..." Shade said sadly, embracing her warmly.

"I'll bet that bully is long gone now." Knuckles muttered, "If she's a squid, she could be anywhere, land or sea. We'll never find her. We'll get you home and all cleaned up Sadie."

The echidna couple carried their injured daughter back home to tend to her bruises and to clean her face up from the blood seeping from her nose and mouth. Upon arrival, the tribe had all been horrified to see what had happened to Sadie, many of them staring in horror and quickly asking about her. Julie-Su ran straight up to Knuckles and Shade, her eyes full of despair upon seeing her bruised, bloodied state.

"My god, what happened to her?!" she shrieked.

"She was attacked by a bully." Knuckles explained, "There's nothing we can do about that now."

Julie-Su nodded grimly and followed the guardian family back home so she could tend to her niece-figure. Moments later, Sadie was put to bed and Shade used a warm, wet cloth to wipe her face clean. It sickened her to see that a mere bully would be horrible enough to beat a five-year-old girl this badly. Seeing Sadie in this state gave her flashbacks to the terrible childhood she had received at the hands of her abusive father, the late Imperator Ix. He used to beat her this badly too, often beating her to the point she couldn't see for a while until her bruises healed. She had to look away from her daughter's bruised face as the sight was too much of a reminder for her. Knuckles patted her back softly to try and comfort her.

"Don't worry about me hon, I'm just getting...Ix flashbacks." Shade muttered hastily, "What's happened to her...well, you know what I mean."

Her husband nodded, understanding completely. He knew that certain things could trigger awful flashbacks to her abusive childhood, she'd been very open to him about that in the past.

"You don't have to stick around Shade. I'll keep an eye on our daughter." Knuckles said tenderly.

Shade got up to her feet and kissed Knuckles on the forehead.

"I hope our baby will recover from this." she said solemnly, "I'd hate for this to...mess her up."

"I don't think she'll get over it easily but we'll try." Knuckles said, "It's the best we can do, I guess."

Shade nodded, turning to leave the room. As soon as she left, Knuckles sat down on the bed beside his daughter, who was tenderly feeling the bruises on her face. Sadie looked over at Knuckles with miserable eyes. How disheartening it was for a father to see his daughter look so sad and defeated.

"How do you feel?" Knuckles asked. A silly question, he already knew the answer to that!

"My face really hurts." Sadie moaned, her speech slightly distorted by the pain in her cheeks, "It feels like Abyss broke it."

"I can assure you Sadie that if we ever see that squid, I'll personally MAKE her give you your necklace back and apologize for what she's done to you!" Knuckles growled, the spike-fisted echidna shaking his fists in rage, "What is the world coming to when people think this is OK?!"

"I really wanted to break her face off, but she was too strong for me." the injured girl said glumly, "I let the tribe down. I was a terrible guardian and I bet you and mama are ashamed of me. I'm no guardian like you two...I'm a weakling, a pathetic little weakling!"

She broken down crying again, covering her eyes with her hands and howling her heart out. Knuckles shook his head sadly, his own heart aching at the sight of his child looking so distraught and beating herself up like this. He wasn't the best at saying anything encouraging, something that made him wonder how Sonic was so good at it. He made being uplifting look SO easy! But the spike-fisted guardian was determined to try, anything if it meant seeing his daughter smile again. He reached over and took Sadie's hands away from her eyes so he could look into them.

"Sadie, look at me." he said firmly. Sadie sniffed, but did so.

"Listen; you are NOT a weakling and we are NOT ashamed of you! In all honesty, I'm amazed and kinda impressed you tried to stand up to that Abyss person! But you're still very young, Sadie and we don't expect you to be a great guardian immediately. Do you think your mother and I became the people we are overnight?! No! We had to endure various hardships and trials to become so! You mustn't let one defeat get you down. If you do, Abyss wins!"

"I...I thought she already won..." Sadie mumbled.

"I mean in the long term, kid." Knuckles corrected, "She beat you now, but that doesn't mean you're a loser. If you think that, she's beaten you both physically *and* mentally. You must be strong and resilient; don't EVER let anyone get you down! You may not be a great fighter now, but I know that with the training and experience, you will become a brilliant guardian like me and your mother."

"You p-promise, daddy?"

"I promise, sweetheart."

Knuckles stroked his daughter's cheeks with his thumbs, wiping away her tears before pulling her into a hug. Sadie closed her eyes for a moment at the wonderful feeling of her father's comforting and protective arms. Then, Knuckles pulled back to look at his daughter again.

"Feel a little better?"

"Yes..." Sadie whispered, the ghost of a smile on her bruised face. It was good enough for Knuckles, who leaned forward and kissed his daughter on the forehead, causing her to involuntarily giggle.

"That's my girl. Now, you get some rest." Knuckles said, "We'll make sure no one else dares to hurt you."

"Okay, daddy." Sadie said, as she settled down in the bed and closed her eyes. She fell asleep within moments as Knuckles got up and left.

The hot-tempered echidna felt really good about himself. He wasn't sure how he'd managed it, but it seemed he'd said just the right words, and all off of the top of his head no less. It seemed being uplifting wasn't all that difficult after all. He even wondered if he'd inspired Sadie to keep on going with some newfound confidence to her. With any luck, she'd be able to beat any bully who dared to mess with her, including this Abyss person...

Downunda, Ten Years Later, a week after the Double Weddings...

Ever since she had been bullied by Abyss, Sadie had been more dedicated to her training as the next guardian, something that both Knuckles and Shade had picked up on immediately. She took her sessions a lot more seriously than before, a far cry from the times where she'd act like it was a bit of fun, and hardly ever rested. She would exercise vigorously, to the point where it looked as if she was trying to make every muscle in her body feel like a boulder, and never once missed a sparring match with her tutors, be they Julie-Su

or her parents. It had reached a point where Shade was beginning to feel she was taking this TOO seriously and had tried to ease her down a little, but Knuckles felt that she was making the right move in being this into it. If anything, it reminded him of his own childhood where he would train vigorously to live on in his father's footsteps.

Over the years, Sadie had grown into a beautiful young woman who was now much more skilled and powerful then she had been as a child. Despite only being 15 years old, her strength could potentially rival that of the adults in the tribe. She was also the apple of many boy's eyes in the tribe, often receiving lingering looks as she went by, though Sadie didn't pay any attention to them. She wasn't interested in a boyfriend yet and certainly didn't want one that would just stare at her like that.

Sadie also had her own sense of style, something that made her stand out from the tribe. Most of the echidnas wore decorative robes or dresses whereas Sadie dressed in a black crop-top, black trousers, black boots and wore black gloves and a black headband with pink symbols on that was seen as a reference to her mother's own headband. She liked dressing this way, feel that this style was more "her" and made her, her own person, not that she didn't want to be part of the tribe. Knuckles would've preferred her to have a less revealing outfit but knew it was pointless to argue so he let Sadie keep her outfit, so long as she remembered to wear a more traditional outfit for special occasions.

As of now, Sadie was about to put her skills she'd been learning since childhood into action. She had been given a test by her father to perform her first hunt. She would catch a Mobini and break it back for the tribe to eat. Sadie was confident that she could do it and had been eager to go. To further test her abilities, Knuckles had let her go alone, demanding that nobody go after her. The sole exception was for someone to play silent witness to the events in case Sadie needed help should her prey be too powerful. Said silent witness as her beloved auntie figure, Julie-Su. She kept her distance and hid behind a lot of trees and plant life so that she could be "invisible" to

Sadie and she'd feel less like she was being watched. She watched closely as Sadie crept through the forest slowly, her beady eyes watching for any signs of wildlife.

Sadie was armed with a spear and a par of hi-tech daggers that were clipped to a belt around her waist, the perfect tools for a hunt. She had politely rejected to use a gun, preferring more of a challenge than simply shooting the Mobini dead. The teenage echidna's nose twitched curiously as a new scent crept up her nostrils. It had to be a Mobini, it didn't smell like any of the vegetation here. She followed the scent, keeping down low and moving with slow, soft footsteps so as not to be heard. Her meditation and battle training had taught her the importance of being light and quiet. Sadie felt like one with nature, calm, peaceful and quiet, the perfect state to be in before an attack. She could hear little Flickies tweeting in the trees as she moved. Then she heard something else. It sounded like branches breaking as whatever it was moved through the forest. Sadie slowly moved up towards a bush and peeked over it.

She'd stricken lucky. There, directly ahead of her, was a Mobini. It was the size of a car and resembled a buffalo with its muscular body, four legs with hooves and twin horns. It lumbered slowly along, its huge nose blowing steam as it searched for something to eat. Sadie took in the size of it, wondering how much this thing had to eat in order to satisfy itself! It must eat enough to feed the entire tribe! Smiling confidently, Sadie clutched her spear tightly.

"Here we go..." she whispered to herself, "Now the moment of truth. The next guardian about to perform her first kill for the tribe..."

She braced herself, ready to pounce. The important thing about hunting was surprise, precision and speed. She had to kill the Mobini quickly, mainly to prevent it from fighting back, but also to prevent it from suffering unduly, as the Echidnas, while willing to kill and eat Mobinis, still valued and respected life.

Sadie waited until the Mobini was almost right on top of her, and then, pounced onto its back, raising the spear over her head and

driving it straight into the beast's back, right through the heart. The Mobini let out a cry of pain, staggered slightly, and then collapsed, dead. The kill had been quick and the Mobini hadn't suffered for too long, just what Sadie had wanted. She was amazed she'd pulled it off on her first try.

"Gotcha." Sadie breathed, pulling the spear out again, "I did it, and my first hunt too. All my training is really paying off."

"It sure is, Sadie!" Julie-Su said, emerging from the bushes with a proud smile on her face, "Well done, I knew you could do it."

"Thanks, Auntie Julie." Sadie said, "Now, to get this beast back to the tribe..."

"I'll give you a hand-"

"No, no; I think I can do this."

Sadie holstered the spear over her shoulder, then walked over to the beast, knelt down, placed her hands underneath its belly and hoisted it up over her head with little difficulty. Most people would need help with something like this, but Sadie now shared her father's super-Mobian strength.

"Whoa!" Julie-Su said, amazed, "You're just like your dad. I swear you could move a house with that strength."

"I'm not sure I'd go that far." Sadie said, though the idea seemed to amuse her nevertheless as she and Julie-Su made their way back home with the dead Mobini.

It wasn't a long walk away, the two echidnas arriving back to the village within minutes. As they entered, Sadie once again got to take in the sight of her beloved villagers and how much The Knuckles Tribe had truly flourished ever since it had been established in this part of Downunda. The village had grown exceptionally and was alive with culture, colour and friendly faces to meet and greet. There

were children running around playing around the houses, people farming Mobinis of different species and people waving to each other, striking conversations and socializing. It was a wonderful sight to see and Sadie would never tire of it no matter how many times she left and came back. Many of the villagers stared at her as she and Julie-Su returned with their fresh kill, impressed she was carrying it with ease. It was quite a sight to watch this skinny, teenage girl carry a huge Mobini like it weighed nothing and many of the echidna puggles* gave a surprised cry of "whoa!" when watching her.

"Wow, look at her go!" cried one kid.

"How much does that thing weigh?!" cried another, "Sadie seems to have no issue carrying it!"

"She must be as strong as the Leader of the Tribe!"

"Well, she IS his daughter so that might explain it."

"How long did it take her to kill that?"

Sadie only smiled bashfully at the comments. It was really nice to be admired, she had to admit. Did her father ever feel like this? She would have to ask him when she saw him. She wouldn't have long to wait for right ahead of her were her parents, both clearly happy to see her. Knuckles and Shade had changed over the years, now sporting different attire to what they had used to wear in the past. Knuckles wore a brown robe that he wore open, showing off his broad chest, a belt and chunky brown boots. The robe was styled with gold and green patterns and he wore gold bands with green emerald studs on his front two dreadlocks. Shade had only kept her headband from her original attire as that was where her helmet formed from whenever she needed her battle suit. She was dressed in regal robes that complimented her figure beautifully and had long streams attached from the back to her wristbands. She also wore a gold necklace with a green emerald stud in the centre. In those clothes, the two truly looked like rulers of the tribe.

Knuckles and Shade watched as Sadie put the Mobini down in front of them, presenting it like a trophy.

"My first hunt, and look what I bring home!" she cried excitedly, "Impressive eh?"

"It's...big." Shade said casually, "That'll feed the entire tribe for a week!"

"So how did she do Julie-Su?" Knuckles asked, "Did she do everything we taught her to?"

"Yes, she killed this Mobini in one quick and efficient move." Julie-Su replied, "Observing it, you'd think Sadie was a ghost with a spear. Creature never saw it coming."

"One move, eh?" Knuckles said, impressed, "Brilliant work, Sadie. If you could kill this creature in one move on your first hunt, it means with time and experience, you'll be just as good as a guardian as me and your mom."

"Great!" Sadie said, delighted.

"Yes, indeed." Shade said, "but don't get cocky, sweetie. Don't assume you'll succeed every time; failure will happen. Always remember your training."

Sadie nodded. She understood what they meant; she had never forgotten how she'd been beaten by Abyss, and was determined never to underestimate her opponent.

"I will mom, always." Sadie declared.

Knuckles and Shade both embraced her warmly, the teen echidna feeling the love they had for her as they hugged. As far as she was concerned, no feeling in the world could be sweeter than a family cuddle.

"We're so proud of you Sadie." Knuckles said with admiration, "We knew you were going to achieve much and you have done thanks to your dedication to your training and your devotion to our tribe. Mark my words, you really are a part of the tribe and a true guardian in the making."

Sadie just glowed, taking in what her father said and swelling with pride on the inside. A successful hunt and her father's approval, she couldn't think of how today could've gone any better. She looked forward to when she could have her grand debut as the new guardian and have a shot at protecting the emeralds of the shrine. But little did she or her parents realize, they were all in for quite a discovery...and Sadie would be in for one of her biggest challenges yet...

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*Baby echidnas are called puggles

It seems that Knuckles and Shade's daughter is going to be a great guardian. She's had her trials and errors but she's doing well. However, things are just getting started for the teen guardian. Tune in next time as her childhood bully gets to reveal her origin story in "Tales from the Abyss"...

Valuable Relics: Chapter 2

15 Years Later: Chapter 3: Valuable Relics

Chapter 2: Deep into the Abyss

The Elite Eleven all filed into the meeting room and sat around the huge round table as they waited to hear what S.T.I.N.G. had to say this time. After the disastrous attempts to kill King Sonic during the Double Weddings and their failed attempt to drain Sonar of her powers so she couldn't heal anybody again, S.T.I.N.G. had been pretty quiet as they'd plotted their next move to take down the Royal Fighters and carry out Project: Robius. Now it seemed that the organization had their next plan ready for the Elite Eleven were all here to find out what their founding masters were going to tell them. Everybody was here from Lyra the Leech to Clove the Pronghorn. Clove was sitting still in her chair with her face blank and her arms folded, her stomach tingling as she wondered if Scorn had caught onto her little sabotage yet. Her sister was convinced that he didn't know and never would know but Clove couldn't help but be anxious. Still, she did her best not to give anything away. The other members didn't seem to suspect anything about her at least. They were too busy chatting amongst one another.

"So what do you think our next mission will be?" asked Drago the Wolf.

"Whatever it is, I hope I don't have to work with Lyra again." muttered Akhlut the Orca, "She was a pain in the ass when I was stuck with her during my last mission!"

"Aww, you don't mean that really!" Lyra piped excitedly, "You enjoyed it, I know you did! We were quite a team!"

"In your fantasy land perhaps..." the orca sighed.

"Whatever's happening, I hope I'M the one going on the next mission!" barked a bear with chains around his wrists and a blue bandana around his head, "I'm eager to take a shot at those Royal Wimps!"

"You wouldn't last five minutes against them Diesel." sneered Drago, "Somebody with brains and cunning should take charge, like ME for instance."

"You calling me stupid?!" Diesel snarled.

"To put it simply...YES!" Drago spat arrogantly.

"How about I mash your face against the table and show you who the stupid one around here is?!" the bear growled angrily.

"You two, enough!" snapped a vulture clad in a golden mask and huge white cloak, "We're supposed to be fighting the enemy, not each other."

"You stay out of this Nephthys , unless you want to get involved." Drago warned.

"Hey, all of you, shut your pieholes!" Lyra shrieked at the top of her voice, "Daddy's here!"

The Elite Eleven stopped chatting and looked in the direction of their master. Scorn had entered the room, slowly walking in with his hands behind his back and his visor fixed straight ahead on his minions. His tail waved back and forth as he moved. Despite his face being unreadable, it was evident he wasn't too pleased to be walking in on his comrades arguing with each other. His body language said it all without him needing to say a word. There was a deathly silence that hung uncomfortably in the air before Scorn finally broke it by talking.

"Are we going to continue whatever petty grudges we may have amongst each other, or are we going to talk about our next move?"

he hissed, every word he said dripping with venom.

Nobody said anything, all of them too afraid to say a word. Scorn continued.

"Good. That's what I thought. Now then, you're all aware that our latest missions haven't been a success at all. King Sonic is alive and that nurse, Sonar, was somehow able to escape our clutches. We suspect it to be an inside job so we'll be keeping a close eye on you all to make sure that none of you had anything to do with it..."

Clove's heart sank a little. To keep up her charade as anonymous, she and Cassia would have to be doubly careful now to make sure she didn't get caught. She kept her face neutral so Scorn wouldn't get suspicious. He didn't even look at her as he continued talking.

"While that's going on, I'll be sending two of you out on a mission in Downunda." the Robian scorpion continued, "We have reason to suspect that the Chaos and Master Emeralds reside there. After all, their guardian, Knuckles the Echidna, lives there."

"It won't be easy to find them given they're no longer in a place as conspicuous as Angel Island." Nephthys noted, "It was destroyed several years ago after the emeralds were stolen."

"Yes, it fell and was reduced to rubble." Scorn acknowledged "But that doesn't mean the emeralds aren't in Knuckles's possession. So the two that will be chosen to go there will infiltrate the country and find the emeralds. Their power will be of great use to us in our crusade against the Royal Fighters."

"Who will you choose?" Drago asked eagerly.

Scorn looked over to the squid woman and the echidna head in a bubble that were sitting on the right-hand side of the table.

"Dimitri is an echidna, native to the country. He'll blend in well." the scorpion deduced, "And Abyss has her island base. The emeralds

can be stored there until we come to collect them. You two will carry out this mission."

"Yes! Finally, I get some action and excitement!" Abyss cried, punching the air with joy, "My blood has been up for a while, now I get to have some fun and take out a Royal Fighter or two! Thank you so much master!"

"WHAT?! The sea-dweller and the floating head get to go?!" Drago cried indignantly, "This is an outrage! Master, that mission is fit for someone like me!"

"The decision has been made Drago. Pray you do not question your own master's tactics." Scorn snapped dismissively.

Drago muttered in annoyance, his ears laying flat against his head. Diesel chuckled mockingly.

"Looks like you may not be as brainy and cunning as you thought." he taunted.

Drago grabbed Diesel by the collar, his face contorting with rage.

"You dare to repeat that to the floor?!" he growled.

"Drago, if you continue like this, I'll have to Roboticize you!" Scorn said threateningly.

"But...I'm already part robotic." Drago pointed out.

"I know." Scorn said in a deadly voice, his indication made clear to Drago, who released Diesel at once.

"Now, if there's no further arguments, meeting adjourned."

The Elite Eleven quickly filed out of the room, glad they didn't have to stay any longer. Some were keen to get back to work while others were just glad they didn't have to be in Scorn's presence any longer. Clove in particular felt like her heart could beat again, knowing that

there was nothing about her that was brought up, meaning she was still in the clear. The only ones that didn't leave were Abyss and Dimitri, the two sticking around to await further orders from Scorn. The squid and echidna stood together as the scorpion approached them with his hands behind his back. He glanced from one to the other as if trying to commit their faces to memory.

"Now then, you two are well aware of how badly Akhlut and Lyra failed their mission." he said softly, his voice still edged with danger, "They lost Ramirez the Chameleon, our greatest spy, to those cretins, they failed to kill King Sonic and they weren't able to retrieve Ramirez. Even bugging Tails didn't harbour a victory for us for they got it out of him. You two must understand you have MUCH to improve on."

"Yes, we know, you've made their failure very clear, O' Great Master." Dimitri retorted, his voice barely containing his annoyance.

"Mark our words master, WE will not fail!" Abyss declared, her tone full of confidence and her face a true mask of pride and arrogance, "Those emeralds will be all yours before you even know it! With a scientist and a pirate on the case, how can you go wrong?"

"You'd better stay true to those words." Scorn snarled, "Otherwise I may have to consider you two...disposable."

He raised his tail threateningly, the sharp, golden sting gleaming in the light. Abyss and Dimitri didn't even flinch, looking more bored with the threat than anything.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, can we go now?" the pirate cephalopod whined.

"Yes, you may head off to Downunda." Scorn concluded, "Take Breakdown the Barracuda with you. I'll feel more confident in your two's chances of success if one of the Founding Five is there to back you up."

"A wise stratagem my liege." Dimitri said, his voice strangely sneering and bitter rather than complimentary. It didn't sound like he really meant what he'd said. Scorn picked up on it straight away.

"If you've got a problem with my decision, Dimitri, maybe I can send someone else and take away what I gave." he muttered.

Dimitri sighed.

"Fine, fine. Breakdown can come, as long as he doesn't interfere unduly."

"Can we PLEASE go?!" Abyss begged.

"Yes, yes, we can go!" Dimitri said, "Let's find Breakdown and get moving."

Without another word, Abyss and Dimitri left the room to get ready to move out. Scorn just watched them leave. The squid and echidna walked together, looking for where Breakdown was so they could take him with them.

"You seem anxious to see some action." Dimitri noted.

"What gave me away?" Abyss snorted, smiling sarcastically, "As a sea-faring, adventurous pirate captain, I've always had a thirst for adventure. Life for me is always about excitement and action! There's nothing quite like the feeling of adrenaline that surges through me whenever I get into the thick of it! It's a feeling that I can't get enough of."

"I'd be weary of how much you get into your adventuring." the robot-echidna-head noted, "You could get yourself into trouble too great for yourself to get out of."

"Fie! Like you have any idea gramps!" the squid retorted, "I've been in so many life and death experiences that I laugh in the face of danger! It doesn't even faze me anymore!"

"A Mobian that laughs at danger is far likelier to meet his or her end than one that fears it, child." Dimitri warned.

"Whatever, you sound like my parents." Abyss dismissed in annoyance, "They were always whining to me about how I need to be careful and take life slowly and steadily. They were too short-sighted to understand how BORING life can be like this! No wonder I left them..." she grumbled, her eyes narrowing.

The robo-echidna's one optic stared up at Abyss in something that seemed to be a mixture of interest and disgust.

"You left your own parents because they valued your safety?" he asked, shocked.

"I left them because they were holding me back!" Abyss snapped angrily, "Life was monotonous and dull under their strict rules, routines and desires to never do anything exciting or interesting! I'd have died of boredom if I stayed with them! Life became SO much more fun when I left those losers. Let them be boring all they like, I've got life to live and I ain't gonna miss out on what it has to offer!"

"And thus, you became a pirate?" Dimitri asked.

"It was my one true dream." Abyss admitted, "Pirates lived a life of no rules or responsibilities. They could go wherever they wanted and could do whatever they pleased. Heh, how could I NOT want to be a part of that?"

"So how did you become one?" Dimitri questioned.

"Not in a way I anticipated, I'll admit." Abyss murmured, "In fact, you could say that the pirate life chose me, rather than me choosing it..."

Several years ago...

The 18-year-old Abyss was striding through a village by the sea. She was hoping to catch a glimpse of a bunch of pirates who were said to reside in the town and store their riches. Abyss' parents warned her not to go near them, but Abyss didn't care what they said. As far as she was concerned, her parents wanted her to live a boring and uneventful life and the very idea made Abyss cringe.

Well those days were over now. She was free, away from her parents and their vapid lifestyles. She was here, living life as a wandering woman going wherever she pleased and seeing what the world had to offer. And as she went on her travels, Abyss was beginning to get an idea on just how big the world was. Ever since she'd left her parents, the squid had seen just how much there was on land from towns to cities and all the countries that contained them. And her parents seriously wanted her to stay underwater all her life? When there was all this to see? They were absolutely crazy! Abyss had been to many places and she was convinced there was still much, much more to see. Her adventures were just beginning!

She passed through the village, her purple eyes taking in everything that she could see. It was a quaint, modest setting with houses that looked rustic and vintage, nothing much to show they were homes in the modern era with their old architecture and simple structures. There were villagers roaming the place, dressed in vintage styles of clothing that made them look a century out of date. They looked very traditional and were going from place to place while talking to one another. There were many villagers at shops selling a variety of items. Abyss could smell the delicious scent of fresh sea-Mobinis caught from the sea and on offer from the fishmongers. There were jewels on sale, delicious goods from the bakery, sweet treats with their sugary smells and book shops that seemed to sell more books than they needed. What's for sure is that anyone living in this village wasn't short of anything to buy. Living here, Abyss imagined, must be easy enough. The squid roamed by some shops, ignoring the calls of the shopkeepers.

"Hello, pretty lady, you in need of bread? I sell lotsa bread!"

"Pretty lady buy a pot? You won't find a finer pot in brass or silver!"

"Sugar dates, sugar dates and figs! Sugar dates and pistachios!"

"Would you like a necklace? A pretty necklace for a pretty lady."

"Fresh sea-Mobini! We catch em, you buy em!"

These guys were so desperate to sell their craft! It made Abyss sneer in disgust. How could anybody live a pathetic life like this, just shouting at any poor sod that walked by in hopes of making a profit?

"If I could have things my way, I'd make it so people could just have what they wanted and not have to pay for shit." she muttered.

The marine-Mobian continued to walk on, wondering if there was anything interesting in this town.

"Now then, if there are pirates here...where would I find them?"

Abyss thought for a few moments. One thing pirates liked to have was rum and rum might be sold at a pub or inn. If pirates did indeed come to this town, there might be such a place nearby.

No sooner had she reached this thought than Abyss heard loud music and joyful voices coming from nearby and she looked to see a pub with a sign saying 'The Oyster's Pearl'. Abyss smiled.

"Well, it's a place to start." she said to herself.

The marine-Mobian headed towards The Oyster's Pearl. She took in its appearance, noticing how it looked so much like a typical pub that it practically didn't try to hide what it was. The sign, which had a picture of an oyster with a pearl inside, may as well have said "This is a pub!" instead of its name. It looked ancient, much older than the town around it, due to peeling paint, grubby windows and moss on the roof tiles and along the bottom of the building. There was an odoriferous scent trickling out from the place, the smell making Abyss's beak wince in disgust. Who would want to come to this

place with a smell like this?! It was an illness waiting to happen! Maybe that was why it would be a good place for pirates to hang out. Who'd want to look for them here?

She entered the pub and saw that there were a few people sitting at tables with food or drinks and chatting to each other. None of the food that was being consumed smelled appetizing and the drinks looked more like sewage waste than anything refreshing to drink. The interior was a shambles with peeling wallpaper, rotting wood and crumbling plaster. The ceiling in particular looked as if it might cave in. The music was coming from a Mobian otter playing the piano, really badly. He was out of tune and kept hitting the wrong keys. Nobody was really listening to him or singing along to his tunes. It was clear he was playing just to show off what skill he believed he had when in fact, he was atrocious at what he was doing. Abyss shook her head with a sneering smile on her face. These poor, pathetic wastes of life! Why would any self respecting Mobian want to come to this dump? She was so glad that she wasn't among those Mobians and wouldn't be joining them.

She strode up to the bartender, who was wiping a glass with a filthy rag. The bartender was an elderly wombat who looked so ancient that Abyss had trouble guessing which decade he might've been born in. He could be a relic from prehistoric Mobius for all she knew. The squid cleared her throat.

"Hey, bartender, care to spare a mo?" she asked, her voice feigning politeness.

The bartender put the glass down and glowered at her with elderly eyes.

"You don't look local." he snorted rudely, "What brings a lass like you down here? Sea-life too boring for you?"

"Like you'd know." Abyss retorted, "I only wanted to ask a few questions when you're finished being cheeky with me!"

The wombat scoffed.

"Heh, says the one with quite the mouth on her." he muttered, "OK then kid, what do you want? If you're not buying, you can piss off. I only serve PAYING customers!"

Abyss scowled. "I simply want some questions answered." she said, "Does asking questions come with a price as well?"

"This isn't a social clubhouse." the wombat said, "Now, if you want answers, buy a drink."

"Fine." Abyss dug in her pocket and drew out the necklace she'd taken from the echidna girl a few weeks ago. She plonked it on the desk, making a mental note to take it back later on when her questions had been answered. "Will this do?"

The wombat picked it up, examining the gold plating and diamonds encrusting it. He smiled.

"This will do." he said. He began filling a glass with the same sewage water-like drink. Abyss' stomach squirmed, but she endured.

"Right, now, do you know if there are any pirates in the area?" she asked.

The bartender stared incredulously at Abyss as if she'd asked a question that nobody should ever ask. Thankfully, he was the only one hearing the squid asking this. Nobody else seemed to notice what was happening. He glanced both ways before leaning closer to his customer. Abyss's curiosity was piqued. It seemed she'd asked the right person.

"You're asking...about PIRATES?!" the old wombat hissed, his tone nervous and full of fear.

"You heard me, or are your ears just painted on?" Abyss retorted.

"Why in the name of Mobius would you want to know about those sea-faring, scum-sucking, treasure-plundering blackguards?!" the bartender exclaimed, "Any normal person would want to stay at least fifty feet away from those savages! You're not one of them are you?"

"Nope, but I hope to become one." the cephalopod girl confirmed, "So where can I find them?"

"Get out of here!" the wombat snarled, "And you can take this back too!" he added, handing the necklace back to her, "Stolen treasure no doubt!"

"Stolen yes, treasure no." Abyss admitted, "But I ain't leaving until you answer my question. Where can I find pirates in this town?"

"I said, GET. OUT!" the old man growled.

He had risen his voice so much that everybody in the bar looked up at him, wondering what was happening. Abyss just stayed by the counter, ignoring the many eyes looking at her and the bartender, refusing to move.

"I reiterate, cause you clearly can't hear what I'm saying." she replied, rudely, "Where. Can. I. Find. Them?"

The bartender was about to march out from around the counter and get physical with the cheeky squid but before anything could happen, somebody ran into the pub and quickly shut the door behind him. It was a porcupine and he looked as if he'd seen the devil himself.

"EVERYBODY, HIDE! PIRATES! PIRATES!" he screamed frantically.

The whole bar went into a frenzy. The customers leapt to their feet, sending their plates and glasses crashing to the floor. The piano man finally stopped playing and ran behind his instrument, hoping it would protect him.

"Quick, quick, everyone in the back!" the bartender cried.

Everyone quickly scrambled towards a door beside the bar, all except Abyss, who was intrigued.

"Now's my chance!" she said to herself. She made her way to the door.

"What the devil are you doing?!" the porcupine shrieked, "Come back!"

"Let her go." the bartender said coldly, "She's looking for pirates and she's got 'em! Good riddance!"

A part of him even hoped the pirates would brutally injure or kill her just to show what an idiot she had been to seek them. As the bar braced themselves, Abyss was immediately met with the sight of a pirate ship pulling into the harbour. It wasn't like any pirate ship she'd expected. It looked like a typical galleon but it was made of metal rather than wood. It was armed to the teeth, cannons poking out of every corner and aiming in all directions. The squid's eyes lit up with delight. It looked so cool and she couldn't wait to see the crew that manned it!

She soon saw them as the crew disembarked and jumped down onto dry land, sending the terrified villagers running away in terror. How quickly it seemed that a small town had been reduced to a panicked state with villagers fleeing this way and that. The crew was something that Abyss also hadn't expected. There were Mobians, but two of them...looked more like robots. There was a sleek, green robot with a torpedo shaped head that looked like he was built for speed, every inch of him screaming swift and agile. The other, much larger one, seemed to be the captain of the crew for he was dressed in a typical captain's uniform that was red and gold and he also appeared to be barking orders. His most distinctive feature was the huge, white moustache he sported. It made him look somewhat comical along with his rotund appearance, but everybody was fleeing in terror from him. It was clear he was no laughing matter. Abyss watched as he turned to his crew, which were all Mobians.

"Ye know what ta do lads n' lasses!" the captain barked, "Plunder this here town and pillage whatever ye can get yer sticky hands on! Don't ye come back empty-handed either or ye'll face tharr wrath of yer fellow leader, Captain Whisker, here!"

"Aye, aye cap'n!" cried the pirates.

The pirate captain, who had called himself Captain Whisker, turned to the green robot.

"Ye lead tharr raids Johnny. I'll be watchin' tharr ship until ye all return." he said.

"Whatever ya say." Johnny replied, "Come on mateys, let's get raidin'!"

Abyss smiled as the pirates fanned out and started grabbing everything they could find: food, books, and valuables. This was what she liked: people taking what they wanted for free, whenever they wanted. How exciting it was to watch all this unfold in front of her!"

"Wonder if they'll let me join?" she said to herself.

Just then, one of the pirates approached her. He was a black sparrow dressed in a red bandana and baggy clothes. Abyss felt excited, this could be her chance to ask to join them! But the pirate pointed a pistol at her.

"Alright, lassie, hand over the purty necklace!" he demanded.

Abyss recoiled, feeling fear surge through her for the first time in a long while. She'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be scared.

"Whoa, whoa, hold it! Put that pistol away!" she cried, "I wanna talk to you guys!"

"I said hand over the purty necklace!" the pirate snapped, curling his finger around the trigger.

"Wait a minute, I wanted to meet you guys!" Abyss exclaimed, waving her hands frantically, "I've been looking for you, please give me a minute to explain myself!"

"What be going on here Jack Sparrow?" barked Captain Whisker.

He heard what was going on and plodded over. Jack Sparrow kept the pistol pointed at Abyss but he turned his head so he could talk to the captain.

"This here lass be refusing ta hand over her treasure!" he explained.

Captain Whisker strode over to Abyss, noticing the necklace she wore. His optics seemed to gleam with interest. The squid looked back at him, noticing how he looked so much larger when he was up close. No wonder he was the captain, a pirate of his size would strike fear in anyone's heart!

"Defying tharr will of me crew will NOT be tolerated on me watch lassie!" Whisker growled, "I suggest ye hand it over to me matey or we'll feed ye to tharr sharks!"

"If you just wait a minute, I've got something to say!" Abyss cried desperately, "I've been looking for you all over town! I've been keen to keen to meet you!"

Whisker folded his arms, his optics blinking with surprise.

"Ye want ta MEET me?" he purred, "Do tell me child..."

Abyss heaved a sigh of relief, glad that SOMEBODY wanted to listen to her. She quickly explained herself.

"I've gotten out of my old, boring life so I could live a more adventurous and exciting life. I've always yearned to be a pirate as their lives are always amazing and I admire what they stand for. So I want to be a part of a pirate crew. Could I join yours by any chance?"

Whisker and Jack looked at each other for a moment. Then they looked back at Abyss. The squid felt nervous, noticing their faces didn't look exactly welcoming.

"Sure dearie, ye can join us." Whisker said, his voice cold and lacking any acceptance, "Me crew have always yearned to have a lass ta enjoy tharr pleasures of. They've missed getting that luxury whilst out at sea...Jack, seize her and hand me her necklace!"

"What, no, NO! That's not what I meant!" Abyss squealed.

But Whisker wasn't listening. He just watched as Jack Sparrow tackled the cephalopod girl down to the ground and quickly tied her hands behind her back. Abyss tried to fight him off but was completely helpless against the strength of the pirate. Whisker then tied a gag around her mouth to shut her up and took the stolen necklace from around her neck. He admired it with delight.

"A fine treasure indeed." the moustached pirate sneered, "I have no idea where ye got it from, but it be mine now. Take her onboard and throw her in tharr brig Jack! We'll join ye when tharr plunderin' be over!"

"Aye, aye, cap'n." Jack hoisted Abyss over his shoulder and began to carry her back to the ship. Abyss struggled furiously in his grip.

"Let me go!" she tried to say, but due to her gag, it came out as "Mmmm me goff!"

"Sorry, lassie, can't understand what yer sayin'." Jack said, "Not that I care, anyway."

Abyss couldn't believe this! She'd wanted to join a pirate's crew, and though her wish had technically been granted, she was gonna be their plaything! For a moment, she wondered if her parents had been right to warn her, but then, she shook it off. If these pirates thought she was gonna keel over and be their plaything, they were sorely mistaken! She'd show them what for! The squid was already plotting

to overthrow the captain and take over herself. That'd show these pirates she was not a toy for them! They'd be sorry they ever messed with her!

Abyss had spent two, long, horrible weeks as a pirate prisoner. Upon being taken into the brig, she had been shackled to the wall by her hands and feet, stretching her limbs out in an X shape, and had been left there to be used for pleasure whenever any of the pirates desired any. Of course, they had been cruel enough to strip all her clothes off, leaving her nude. The poor squid had been abused and humiliated these past two weeks, unable to really fight back. The crew didn't care how she felt, they were just enjoying having her around to satisfy their needs. Despite all this, Abyss had refused to give into them. She remained forever defiant in the face of her captors. They didn't like this of course and would often torture her to make her back down. The resulting punishment had left her with many cuts and injuries that had become scars over time, but that didn't seem to make her any less desirable to the pirates. They still lusted over her regardless.

Abyss stood where she was chained, her head low as she was healing from her latest abuser. She was in a lot of pain, especially down below, but there was a lot of anger boiling inside of her. The squid was beginning to believe now would be a good time to try and make her move. She was NOT going to put up with this abuse a day longer! As she contemplated her escape, the door to the brig opened and in walked Captain Whisker, the robotical pirate glancing over at her with his cold, blue optics.

"Resting comfortably lassie?" he crooned, his voice devoid of any sympathy to his prisoner.

"Come for a visit?" Abyss muttered, her face blank.

"You've proven highly resilient to the beatings you've been receivin', lassie." Whisker said, "I'd say I was impressed, but that's be a lie. It's highly bothersome."

"Well, sorry to disappoint!" Abyss said sarcastically, "I'm not your crew's plaything!"

Whisker glared at her.

"Well, we'll see if you can handle being keelhauled for a few days!" he snarled.

"You think dragging me from under a ship will get me to back down?" Abyss snapped, "If you can't stand me being all resilient and crap, you may as well kill me now and spare yourself a lot of grief because you're just gonna get more and more irritated with me the longer you keep me alive!"

Whisker just shook his head while stroking his namesake.

"Fie, I would hate to deprive the crew of the one thing that delights them other than treasure." he said casually, "Also, I have other uses for you besides pleasure for me crew dearie..."

He then held out the necklace that Abyss had stolen from Sadie the Echidna. Abyss's purple eyes fixed on it, still mad to see it in this scoundrel's hands instead of her own. It wouldn't be his for much longer!

"I've been fascinated with this necklace." Whisker went on, "It looks quite unique and not like any jewel I've stolen before. Tell me dearie, where did ye get this? Ye said that ye stole it. I suppose it belonged to someone very wealthy."

"How about you let me outta these chains and I'll tell you?" Abyss sneered, tugging on her shackles.

"Ye will tell me right away!" Whisker snapped, backhanding his prisoner across the face, "Ye won't be going anywhere so ye may as well answer tharr question!"

"If I'm not set free, then I don't talk." Abyss retorted, ignoring the pain in her cheek, "It's your choice, fatty.

Let me go and I'll tell you everything you wanna know."

"What, and give ye tharr chance ta escape?" Whisker snorted, "Ye are such an idiot if ye think I be stupid enough to fall fer such an obvious trick lassie! Back when I was organic, some gals had pulled that stunt on me and managed to flee with me treasures! I never fell for it again after that!"

"Wait, you're NOT a robot?" the squid asked curiously, "You used to be organic? As in...Mobian?" she gasped as it suddenly dawned on her, "By Neptune, you've been roboticized!"

"That be right lassie!" the robo-pirate confirmed, "Unlike other Mobians who fell victim to Doctor Eggman's attempts ta make the world his own, I actually EMBRACED being a Robian! It made me more powerful than any other pirate sailing tharr seven seas! Nobody was a match for me! So after that landlubber, Sonic, ruined tharr doctor's plans again, I sought to restoring me self ta Robian form! Thankfully, I came across some old, abandoned Eggman tech and I was able ta recreate one of his machines that could roboticize in a single blast! I used it on me self and then destroyed it after I'd used it. Don't want me crew thinking they can use it fer themselves."

"And you've remained the unchallenged pirate captain since..." Abyss mused.

"That be right also!" Whisker said, rather proudly, "No one has ever trumped me!"

Abyss saw her chance.

"Then, I guess you'd defeat me in a heartbeat." she said.

Whisker laughed.

"Are ye challengin' me?! Me, Captain Whisker?! You wouldn't stand a chance. I could defeat you with my sword tied behind my back!"

"Well, then, why not let me down and prove it?" Abyss said, "Unless you're afraid to lose..."

The squid smirked confidently as she saw Whisker visibly shake with anger. She felt like she'd said the right thing to make him snap. Two weeks on this ship with Whisker had given her the impression that he had an ego bigger than the ocean itself so she thought exploiting it would be the way to get out of here. It seemed to work for Whisker reached into his coat and pulled out a bunch of keys.

"Alright then lassie, if ye want ta prove yerself, ye may challenge me to a duel." the roboticized pirate declared, "Winner takes all, loser meets Davy Jones!"

"Fair enough." Abyss said casually as Whisker set to unlocking her shackles.

He freed Abyss from the wall and turned around, clearly intending to head off somewhere.

"I'll get ye something ta wear first and then we can begin our duel." the pirate captain said, "I'm sure we have something that'll fit..."

The last thing he heard in his life was the sound of a gunshot. He stood still and then collapsed dead on the floor, a gaping hole in his head from where he'd been shot. Shards of metal and pieces of circuitry had littered the floor. Abyss stood where she was, pointing the pistol she'd used to kill Whisker at his dead body. She blew the smoke away from the barrel, smirking triumphantly. How easy it had been for her to use her tentacle to swipe the gun from him while his back was turned! It served the idiot right for falling for such an obvious trick!

"No one has ever trumped you?" she sneered, "You may wanna rephrase that."

She left the brig to find some new clothes to wear, leaving Whisker's dead body on the floor...

Up on the decks, Johnny was standing at the bow of the ship and keeping a close eye out for any signs of land. The missile-headed robot looked from left and right but so far, there was only ocean as far as his optics could see. This annoyed him. How much longer would they have to sail before they finally reached land?!

"I hate it when there's no raids to be had for too long..." he sighed, "I bet the captain will be annoyed that it looks like yet another day at sea for us."

"It is annoying, yes." said a female voice from right behind him, "But since I'm in charge now, I'm feeling too happy to complain about it."

Johnny wheeled around. Abyss was standing there, now wearing a captain's jacket and trousers.

"A-Abyss?!" Johnny spluttered, "How did you escape? And where's the Captain?"

"You're looking at her." Abyss replied.

The speedy robot gasped, realizing straight away what the squid had implied.

"The captain...you killed him didn't you?!" he cried angrily.

"Oh don't act like it was unjustified!" Abyss snorted, "He's the one who locked me up when I only wanted to join you all and kept me around for the crew to use as their personal plaything! I think anyone in my position would've wanted to shoot the bastard after that!"

"MUTINY!" Johnny cried angrily, "I shall avenge Captain Whisker for this! You are no captain beaky and I shan't take orders from..."

He got no further as Abyss took out the pistol she'd used to kill Captain Whisker and shot Johnny in the head with it. The robot collapsed onto the deck, his body still and lifeless. His head lay in fragments all around him. Abyss smirked at his corpse.

"Number one rule of battle...don't stand around talking." she gloated, "Now to deal with all those bastards who violated me..."

She strode back into the cabin to kill the rest of the crew. After what they'd done to her, she had no interest in being THEIR captain. Instead, she'd start over from scratch and create a new crew, one that would obey her every commands and make her the most fearsome pirate on Mobius...

The Ocean, a year before S.T.I.N.G. made itself known...

Abyss had lived up to what she'd declared she'd do. After shooting Whisker's crew dead and throwing their corpses overboard, she had sailed around Mobius to find other pirates and start up a crew of her own. It had expanded greatly, giving her the largest pirate gang of any pirate captain on Mobius. She'd managed to win them over with her boasts on how she'd taken down Captain Whisker, something the other pirates approved of as they'd been in competition with him for years. They were all too happy to work with Whisker's killer. And thus, Abyss's dream had come true. She'd achieved her desired adventurous life and had become greater than what she could've expected. A pirate captain and the most powerful pirate in the world! What could be better!

She was now sailing towards land for she'd heard of a new treasure that was waiting to be plundered and was keen to obtain it.

"The Legendary Treasure of Chaos..." Abyss purred, "Never heard of it but I bet it's something amazing. Might even be the greatest treasure of all! And it'll be MINE!"

She turned to her first mate, a Mobian jellyfish known as Sting, which sounded silly but was still apt, as his tentacles packed a lot of shock in them.

"Mr Sting, get the long boat ready to go ashore." she said, "I wish to grab this treasure myself; you and whoever is best with a cutlass shall join me."

"Aye, aye cap'n!" cried Sting, his tentacles tingling with electricity. It always happened whenever he got excited.

Soon enough, Abyss and some of her crew had boarded the longboat and rowed ashore to a cave entrance that was said to contain the treasure they'd come to obtain. The squid's eyes sparkled with delight as they neared land. How she couldn't wait to get her hands on that treasure! In a few minutes, the longboat reached the shore and the pirates all disembarked onto the rocky surface. They cold see something shining at the back of the cave mouth. Despite this, the pirates all kept their weapons in hand. They couldn't be too careful when getting this treasure, rival pirate gangs could be lying in wait to prepare an ambush.

Abyss led the way, her eyes darting back and forth repeatedly to make sure the coast was clear. There was no danger around so she pressed on. There she could see, sitting at the back of this cave mouth, was the Legendary Treasure of Chaos. It was a huge statue shaped like the watery god himself and holding a huge Chaos Emerald. It was the most beautiful thing Abyss had seen in her life and the squid was going to have it all to herself! It made her feel giddy with delight as she approached it.

"Oh ho, ho, ho! Mateys, we've hit the jackpot here!" Abyss exclaimed excitedly, "We best be quick before any other pirate comes here."

She reached out to grab it...only for her hand to pass straight through it. She gasped in horror and tried again. The same thing happened. Sting came up behind Abyss and scratched his blobby head in confusion.

"M'Lady, the treasure be a hoax!" he cried.

"It's a hologram..." Abyss growled angrily, looking down to see the projector that was making the image of the treasure, "The whole thing was a goddamn trick and we fell for it! Quick, back to the ship before anyone ambushes us!"

"At ease everyone, this wasn't to set up an ambush at all. We only set this up because we wanted to meet you." came a voice that neither of the pirates recognized.

Abyss turned and saw a shadow in the corner of the cave detach itself from the others and walk into the light. It was a Mobian lion with a proud, orange mane and carrying a sword in a scabbard on his back. The lion was huge and muscular, giving Abyss the impression he could crush boulders with his bare hands. She raised her tentacles menacingly while her crew pointed their cutlasses at him.

"Reveal thy name!" the pirate captain snarled, "And why did you lure us here?!"

"My name is Razoul." the lion explained, "And I represent an organization that wishes to save Mobius from itself and the mad ramblings of its hero, Sonic the Hedgehog. We have heard much about you pirates and made this fake treasure to lure you here. You see, we'd like to make all of you...a proposition. Don't worry, it's not another trick."

Abyss lowered her tentacles but kept her guard up just in case this was also a trick.

"I'm listening." she said wearily.

"My organisation is known as S.T.I.N.G." Razoul began, "We believe that under the rule of Dr Eggman, we would've had a better life, had it not been for that meddlesome hedgehog and his friends, who believe in shackling themselves in servitude and keeping things a

certain way. Our leader, Scorn, however embraces change with open arms."

"How does all this be affecting us?" Sting asked.

"Well, you pirates are generally unwelcome in the current state of affairs." Razoul said, "But under STING's rule, you will have free reign, with no fear of arrest or opposition."

Abyss smiled. "I'm interested." she said. She turned to her crew. "How about you, mateys?"

"If you're interested, we're interested, cap'n!" Sting said and the rest of the crew nodded.

"So if we join S.T.I.N.G., what other benefits will there be?" Abyss asked with interest, "Untold treasures beyond our wildest dreams?"

"That and more." Razoul said with a smile, "You will have access to technology like you wouldn't believe, you'll be able to make yourselves invincible and able to stomp over whatever resistance or rival gangs you may come across and you'll get a chance to kill those who would otherwise oppress you all. Trust me child, this is an offer you'd be crazy to reject."

Abyss nodded slowly.

"Good thing I'm NOT crazy then." she sneered, "We're in! ALL of us!"

She and Razoul then shook hands to conclude their business. Both smiled at each other as they did so.

"I'm glad you see it my way Abyss." Razoul purred, "Welcome to S.T.I.N.G.!"

"...and so...here I am." Abyss concluded, "Certainly not what I expected as you can see! Heh, who'd have thought I would end up

here after achieving my dream of being a pirate?"

"Hmm, interesting." Dimitri admitted, "But did your first mate have to change his name to avoid confusion?" He chuckled at his own joke.

"Ha, Ha, ha." Abyss said sarcastically, "No, we simply spell the initials in his company to avoid confusion."

"I see." Dimitri replied, "Though I do have to wonder, with you having abandoned your own family for your own selfish interest, joined a pirate gang and took it over and joined an organization that worships an insane tyrant like Dr. Eggman...how can you live with yourself after all that? Do you ever regret your life's decisions in anyway?"

"As if I need to answer that." Abyss retorted.

That made the echidna head frown in disgust. He didn't think he could hate Abyss anymore than he already did, but somehow she'd managed to be even more loathsome. By then, they'd found Breakdown, who was waiting in anticipation. He was growling excitedly, his robotic hackles raised. He was clearly keen to get in on the action.

"Easy, big boy." Abyss said, stroking Breakdown's snout, "You'll get your taste of flesh soon enough."

The barracuda's toothy maw curled into a smile of delight.

"Yes darling, you're coming with us to take part in a very special mission!" Abyss cooed, her tone sweet and condescending as if she was talking to a pet dog rather than a Mobian, "We're going to steal the Chaos Emeralds from Downunda and S.T.I.N.G. wants you to help me and Dimitri carry the mission out! Sounds like fun, doesn't it?"

Breakdown nodded, his optics twinkling with delight. Dimitri on the other hand looked less than thrilled.

"So when shall we depart to your island base...captain?" the robotic head muttered, spitting the last word out with loathing.

Abyss just smiled at her companion, her beak curled up into a grin of excitement.

"Immediately!" she declared, "The sooner this mission begins, the better!"

"Then maybe on the way there, you'd be interested in hearing a story of my own." Dimitri added.

"If it's about how you came into S.T.I.N.G., I don't really care." Abyss dismissed.

"No my dear...it's more about a treasure that Downunda contains...one that could be beneficial to us all..." the floating echidna head purred.

So that's the story of Abyss the Squid. We return to Downunda as we see how things are doing for the Knuckles Clan and how the two S.T.I.N.G. agents will carry out their plan. So will they get the Chaos Emeralds? What treasure does Dimitri speak of? Will the Knuckles Clan be prepared for this? Find out next time as we meet "The Archaeologist"...

Valuable Relics: Chapter 3

15 Years Later: Chapter 3: Valuable Relics

Chapter 3: The Archaeologist

"And so here we are now, with Nurse Sonar as our guest until she's safe enough to go home again!"

"Wow, that's quite a story there Zoe! Sounds incredible that she managed to escape from S.T.I.N.G. like that and gets to live with you and his majesty, the King!"

"I know! The woman who saved dad's life gets to stay over with us! Awesome, isn't it?!"

"I'd say the more "awesome" thing is the fact that S.T.I.N.G. has a mole that was able to help Nurse Sonar escape. Just imagine the look on their stupid faces when they find out! Ha, ha, ha! They think they've got eyes and ears everywhere? Looks like one pair of eyes and ears is on THEM instead."

"You said it, Sadie!"

The echidna couldn't help but laugh in response, glad that Zoe liked what she'd said. Of course, the princess hadn't wasted any time in telling her friend about the whole incident with Sonar being kidnapped by S.T.I.N.G. but managing to escape due to an inside job from one of their own. After establishing a connection between the two teens, Zoe and Sadie had remained in contact and regularly talked to each other via webcams whenever they had a moment. Sadie was in her home sitting in front of the computer with Zoe on her screen, talking to her through her laptop back in New Mobotropolis. It was rather amusing, their fathers had to admit, that their daughters seemed to get on better than they did.

"Have you heard from the new couples lately?" Sadie asked, curiously, "Have they been OK since the weddings ended?"

"Last I heard from Uncle Tails and Aunt Cosmo, they're currently on their honeymoon in Mazuri while Ruben and Sora are back in Chun-Nan" Zoe explained, "I hear Mazuri's a beautiful country. I asked dad if we could go someday and he says we'll see about it. In my eyes, I think he just wants to keep me close to him for the time being after everything S.T.I.N.G.'s pulled lately..." she muttered.

"You've got it easy, sister." Sadie snorted, "My dad's just been making me train harder than ever before! My arms are STILL killing me from yesterday's exercises!" she cried, massaging her biceps.

"I imagine your working out's attracting a lot of boys though." the princess teased.

"You're not wrong, I do seem to attract a lot of attention." the guardian murmured, "But I'm not ready for that kind of thing yet. I'm just focused on keeping to my training and becoming the great guardian my parents are shaping me up to be. I still wonder if I'll ever live up to them..." she said, her voice trailing off as concern grew over her.

"Don't worry about yourself Sadie. You'll be great! I know you will!" Zoe said encouragingly, her face lit up with a bright, reassuring smile for her friend.

Sadie looked back at her computer screen, still unsure of herself but touched by her friend's encouragement.

"At least you have faith in me Zoe." she said graciously.

"Course! That's what friends are for!" Zoe replied, "Say, how are Knuckles and Shade? Are they doing OK?"

"They're fine." Sadie informed, "They're a bit on edge still thanks to...you-know-what, so they're spending more time by the Emerald

Shrine than they used to, but they're still OK. I'm gonna go over when we're finished talking to each other."

"Cool!" Zoe said, "Well, don't let me keep you. The safety of the Emeralds is of the utmost importance and the more hands there to protect them, the better!"

"True." Sadie said, "but that doesn't mean I don't value your friendship any less, Zoom-Zoom!" She grinned teasingly.

"Argh! I told you not to call me that!" Zoe said in exasperation.

"But it really suits you!" Sadie jeered.

Zoe just glowered at her friend in annoyance but said nothing. She knew deep down that the guardian was only messing with her.

"Well anyways, I'll leave you to it. Hope to see you again soon Sadie." she said cheerfully, "Say hi to Knuckles and Shade for me!"

"You got it sis, see you later." Sadie replied.

The two girls switched off their web-cams so they could end the conversation and get back to their daily lives. As Sadie got up from her computer and stretched, took a moment to ponder about what today might have in store for her. More training, no doubt. But would today bring about a chance for her to put her training to the test, something beyond mere hunting for Mobini? She supposed anything could happen and she would just have to face the day as it comes. The teen echidna left her house to look for her parents.

She didn't look for them for long for after taking a few steps out of her house, she saw them immediately. Knuckles and Shade were gathered around Julie-Su, who seemed to be standing still with her robotic dreadlock standing completely upright with the tip formed into a satellite dish. It twitched every so often, turning this way and that as if trying to pinpoint something. Julie-Su remained perfectly still as her dreadlock worked. The sight made Sadie stare in wonder for

she'd never seen Julie-Su do that with it before. She knew her auntie-figure could use it to interact with technology, but not something like this. She stood by watching as Knuckles and Shade spoke to her. She even noticed that Shade was already in her trademark Nocturnus armour. Clearly something was about to happen. Her mother NEVER armoured up unless it was important.

"So what is it? Any idea what we're looking for Julie?" Knuckles asked curiously.

"The signal's rather faint but I'm picking something up a few clicks from the village." the pink echidna explained, "It sounds like a distress signal. I think there's someone calling for help out there."

"Any idea EXACTLY where it is?" Shade put in.

"It seems to be coming from that direction." Julie-Su answered, pointing with her robot arm, "Whoever's sending that signal, it's that way."

"Maybe S.T.I.N.G.'s up to their old tricks again..." Knuckles growled, "We should go investigate Shade! Whoever's behind that signal could be in trouble!"

"Of course my love." Shade agreed.

"Mom! Dad! What's going on?" Sadie asked, deciding to make her presence known.

The married couple turned around, surprised to see their child had been eavesdropping on them. Knuckles just shook his head, more amused than annoyed.

"Heh, I told your mother that you're too much of an eavesdropper for your own good." he laughed, How you manage to sneak up on us and listen in without us noticing, I'll never know!"

"Julie-Su has picked up a distress call and she has an idea where it's coming from." Shade explained, "We're going to investigate now."

"Can I come too?" Sadie asked.

"No Shade. We need you here with Julie-Su to watch over the village while we're gone." her mother replied, "Your father and I both feel you're strong enough to be given that responsibility."

Sadie was a little bummed that she couldn't go with her parents but at the same time, she was glad to hear her parents thought this about her. They believed she was strong enough to watch over her people and their homes? She hadn't expected today to go like this, that's for sure!

"Wow...really?! Thanks mom!" she cried out excitedly.

Shade just gave her a firm look, making Sadie realize she was getting too excited about it. The would-be guardian quickly regained herself and cleared her throat.

"Um, thank you mom." she said meekly.

"That's better dear." Shade said, "Me and your father will be back soon. Take care of yourself Sadie, and remember to do what Julie-Su tells you."

"Don't worry about her hon, she'll be fine!" Knuckles reassured, "The village is in good hands with her."

Shade nodded, saying nothing more as she pressed on the symbol on her headband, which formed her helmet around her head. True, they were only investigating a distress signal, but Shade had insisted on armouring up in case they had a fight on their hands. At least now, she'd be properly prepared for what may come. With nothing else to stick around for, Knuckles and Shade headed off in the direction of the signal. They disappeared into the surrounding

forests, leaving Sadie and Julie-Su standing in the middle of the village together. The young guardian turned to her auntie figure.

"So who do you think might be sending that signal, Aunt Julie?" she asked.

"Could be anyone." Julie-Su shrugged, "I hope that whoever sent it will be fine by the time the guardians reach them."

Sadie was sure they would. One could always rely on her parents to help them when they needed it.

Just then, Sadie's nose picked a new scent; at first, she thought it was another Mobini roaming close by, but Sadie had trained to tell whether it was Mobian or Mobini just by the smell. This was clearly a Mobian.

"I sense it, too!" Julie-Su said, understanding at once without words, "There's someone close-by; could be spying on us."

"But where...?" Sadie wondered, her purple eyes narrowed as they scanned the outskirts of the village. Just then, she saw a faint rustle in the bushes.

"There!" she cried, and darted forward, diving into the bushes. There was a scream as Sadie's fingers closed around something, or rather, someone.

"Let me go! Let me go!" the person cried, a female with a rich Mercian accent.

Sadie ignored her and dragged her, none too gently, out of the bushes by the legs. Once the female was in the open, Sadie saw it was a teal pika, roughly the same age and height as her father, with brown eyes, purple spectacles and wearing a shoulder-less black bodysuit underneath a brown jacket with matching backpack and brown boots with white soles. Her hair was curled into a lock at the front of her head and tied into two buns at the back.

"Who are you?" Julie-Su said, drawing a two-barrel pistol from her jacket, "Were you spying on us?"

The pika stared at the pistol nervously, sweat trickling down her forehead. She tried to move away but Sadie held her tight, refusing to let go.

"P-p-please fellow villager, I d-d-didn't mean any harm! Please point that away!" the pika stammered.

"Give her a good reason too!" Sadie growled, tightening her grip on the pika's arms and making her cry in pain.

"I demand an answer, were you spying on us?" Julie-Su repeated, refusing to point the pistol away.

"N-n-no! I wasn't! I s-swear I wasn't!" the blue Mobian shrieked.

"Then why were you lurking in the bushes just then?" Sadie asked suspiciously.

"I was merely observing, honest I was!" the pika explained, "I'm an archaeologist and I was interested in exploring this village. I have a huge fascination with different civilizations and cultures and wanted to explore this one."

"A likely story." Julie-Su snorted "If you're an archaeologist, I doubt you'd be lurking in the bushes watching us like that. Sadie, take her to the prison tent and tie her up. We'll let the guardians speak to her and see what they think to her story."

"Oh please, I beg of you, don't imprison me!" the pika cried frantically, "I wasn't spying on you, honest I..."

"Just shut up before you get yourself in more trouble." Sadie snarled, clamping a hand around the girl's mouth.

The so-called archaeologist was taken away to be imprisoned until Knuckles and Shade came back. Julie-Su followed closely with her

pistol still pointed at the pika while Sadie dragged her away. She hoped that they wouldn't be long for she wanted to get to the bottom of this trespasser and didn't want to hold her for long.

While Sadie and Julie-Su were dealing with the seeming snooper, Knuckles and Shade were making their way through the jungle to find the source of the distress signal. The jungle was thickly grown, hot and sticky, which made their trek all the more difficult. They stepped over fallen trees, thick bushes and ducked down under low hanging vines. Knuckles slapped his face as a mosquito buzzed near his cheek.

"Gah, why couldn't this distress signal be coming from a place that's not full of bugs?!" he complained, "I hate walking through jungles!"

"I can't say I'm fond of them either." Shade murmured as she felt her boots squelching through thick, oozy mud, "But I'm not gonna let that stop us from rushing to the aid of whoever's sending that signal. Keep your voice down and maybe we might here something that says we're getting close."

"I'll be amazed if I hear anything aside from mosquitoes buzzing." Knuckles sighed.

Just then, he did hear something other than mosquitoes buzzing; a faint cry of help. He looked at his wife, who nodded. She'd heard it too. They quickened their pace as much as they could, given the muddy ground, keeping their ears open.

"Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me?"

"We're getting closer." Knuckles said, and he called out, "Hello! Where are you?"

"Over here!"

Knuckles and Shade emerged into a small clearing, and there, his sphere lying half-submerged in mud, was Dimitri. His tentacles lay splayed out in the mud, completely unmoving. His sphere was cracked and singed, suggesting he'd been shot. The guardian's eyes stared in surprise at the sight of this strange person before him.

"My gosh...Shade, are you seeing this?" Knuckles said, astounded.

"By the Ancients, what is that?" Shade gasped, her voice a loud whisper of surprise.

"You...came." Dimitri cried feebly, "I was beginning to fear...nobody would hear me..."

His voice was weak and hoarse. To Knuckles and Shade, it sounded more like he was whispering loudly rather than talking. The couple gathered around him and gently picked him up, the process delicate as if they were afraid he would break if they did anything wrong. The robot echidna head groaned, his tentacles dragging uselessly as he was picked up. Knuckles scraped some of the mud off of his glass sphere. He had so many questions regarding this stranger, but he decided to go through them one at a time.

"So you're the one sending that distress signal." he acknowledged, "Can't say I expected to find a...uh...head in a glass ball. Is that offensive?"

"No...I'd say...you summed me up perfectly." Dimitri muttered, "I'm so glad...you found me. I thought...I was doomed out here."

"Who are you?" Shade asked curiously, "And excuse me for asking but...how did you end up like this?"

She gestured to the robot head.

"My name...is Dimitri." Dimitri answered, "And...I don't wish...to talk...about my current state. You can...ask questions later...it's paramount I'm taken...to a mechanic."

"What's wrong? Are you badly damaged in some way?" Knuckles asked.

"My power source...is running out...and after I crashed here, my internal systems...were heavily damaged." Dimitri explained, coughing between words, "I...cannot move...at all. I can't float...or move my limbs...please kind people, will you...help me?"

"Of course. We don't turn away those who seek our aid." Shade declared, "How did you end up here? Were you attacked?"

"I was..." Dimitri wheezed, "An...organization named...S.T.I.N.G wanted me to join them. I refused...so they tried to kill me...for it. They shot me down...and left me for dead."

The story made the guardians frown with disgust. How low could S.T.I.N.G. stoop to just leave a cyborg man like this to die? And all because he refused to join! How they could label Sonic and the R.F.S. as fascists when they were the ones acting as such, they'd never know. They looked down at Dimitri with pitying glances.

"We're so sorry to hear what's happened." Knuckles said grimly, "Mark my words Dimitri, we will make S.T.I.N.G. pay for this!"

"You...know them?" Dimitri asked, interested.

"We've tangled with them twice already." Shade explained, "First time, they kidnapped the princess and burnt down Castle Acorn. Second time, they tried to kill King Sonic while four of our comrades were getting married. They're a bunch of cultists who think Eggman's way is right and want to finish what he started."

"That's...what they said...to me too." the cyborg echidna whispered.

"We'll get you back to our village so you can be repaired." Knuckles declared, "Our tribe has a few mechanics, they'll be able to patch you up."

"Thank you so much, kind people." Dimitri said graciously, "I don't know how I can ever repay...you both...for such generosity."

"It's the way of the guardians, old timer." Shade said modestly, "We do our bit to help others."

She and Knuckles carefully carried Dimitri away, holding him between them so they wouldn't drop him. They moved slowly and steadily so as not to fall over anything in the jungle, their feet softly squelching into the mood. As they carried him, the two didn't notice that Dimitri was grinning with delight to himself. They'd bought his ruse and now the plan was in action! He had been told that Knuckles especially was known to be gullible, but he didn't think he was THAT gullible!

The echidnas never even noticed that they were being watched as they took Dimitri back to the village. Abyss the Squid was there, watching from a tree top, as they took the bait and headed for home. Her beak curled in a grin of pleasure, pleased to see all was going according to plan.

"Some guardians they are!" she sneered to herself, "Falling for such an obvious trick like that! And Dimitri complained about me having to shoot him..."

She chuckled as she glanced down at the pistol in her thigh pouch that she'd used to set up the whole scene the guardians had witnessed. Now all the squid had to do was wait until Dimitri let her know that he was in the village and setting the two on a mission to find this supposed treasure he'd told her about before their mission had began. Then she'd come in and swipe those emeralds and maybe kidnap some villagers to bug while she was at it! How she couldn't wait to get started...

Back at the village, the pika had been taken to the prison tent and tied up, just as Julie-Su had ordered. The prison tent was a temporary holding place for any trespassers to be held until the

guardians could see them. Knuckles had suggested it himself, his reason being that when he was in his old tribe, they had something like that too. Anyone found guilty of spying on the tribe and invading their territory was taken to the tent and held prisoner until the ones in charge of the tribe could decide their fate. If they were innocent, they were freed. If they were guilty, they were executed. Shade had objected, feeling this was too barbaric and more closer to Imperator Ix's ideology than her husband's so Knuckles hadn't kept the execution sentence. Instead, guilty prisoners were handed over to King Sonic and Sally to put in the New Mobotropolis Detention Centre, the two agreeing it was a much more humane thing to do.

The pika felt nervous as she contemplated her fate. She was tied tightly up to a wooden beam in the middle of the tent that supported the whole thing. The pole was incredibly thick and strong so breaking it was out of the question. The pika's hands were bound with thick rope that held them firmly above her head. Sadie had been taught how to tie knots should she ever be in a position she'd have to imprison anybody so the pika was going nowhere with how tightly Sadie had tied her up. She didn't even bother to struggle, knowing she wouldn't get free. Her coat and backpack had been removed, the pika watching with dismay as Sadie rummaged through the coat's pockets and the contents of her backpack.

"P-p-please, fellow villager, I must insist you be careful with that. Some of the stuff in m-my backpack is q-quite fragile." she pleaded.

"You talk again and I'll gag you." Sadie warned, "You're not in any position to tell me anything. I'm the daughter of the guardians so you answer to me as well as them!"

The pika understood and didn't dare say anything else. Sadie had emptied the backpack and arranged the contents on the floor, eyeing them with interest. All she'd found in there was a packed lunch, a book about various cultures, a map of Downunda and some relics that the stranger had clearly found on her travels. Nothing to suggest that she was a S.T.I.N.G. agent of any kind. But this didn't mean she was innocent by any means. She may not work for them, but she

could still be a spy of some kind. She stood up and walked over to her prisoner. The pika gulped, worried on what she was going to do to her.

"Who are you? And why do you have all this stuff in your backpack?" Sadie demanded.

"M-my n-name is Relic, f-fellow guardian." the pika answered.

Sadie snorted.

"Be serious!" she laughed.

"I am!" Relic snapped, "That is honestly my name! You do realize we live in a world where people are named "Sonic" or "Tails" or even "Shadow" right? What's so weird about my name?"

"Fair enough." Sadie agreed, "So then..."Relic"," she said the name in a mocking tone, "Explain the contents of your backpack. It seems very suspicious you happen to be in the area and you have a map of Downunda on you."

"The lunch is for sustenance, obviously." Relic said, taking slow deep breaths to remain calm, "The books are for background information on the places I visit, so I can sh-show respect; the map is to help me know where I am. That always helps when you're in a foreign land."

"And what about these relics?"

"Just souvenirs from previous travels."

"So why come to Downunda?"

"Because I wanted to chronicle the Chaos Emeralds, Miss. That's all, I swear. The world deserves to know."

"But it could also give away our location to enemies." Sadie said.

The tribe was known about by the Royal Fighters, of course, but only a handful knew exactly where it was. This was for safety reasons. Relic's statements only fueled Sadie's suspicions that Relic could be a spy.

"Who are you working for?"

"I work for Mercia Grand University. Please miss, I don't want any trouble."

"You already got it considering your trespassing." Sadie retorted.

"I'll admit, that was very inconsiderate of me to just wander by like that and I should've made my presence known, but I cannot stress enough that I didn't mean to do so." Relic replied, "I have no nefarious intent of any kind madame, honest!"

"Sorry, but even if I believed you, it's not my position to let you go." Sadie said, shrugging, "In our tribe, the guardians have the final say. Rules are rules. You're gonna have to wait until the get back."

Hopefully, said guardians will have considerably better manners than you, young lady! Relic thought bitterly.

Luckily, or maybe unluckily for her, she didn't have long to wait. As Sadie had been talking to the pika, Knuckles and Shade had returned back to the village, still carrying Dimitri between them. The robot echidna head's optics gleamed with awe as he took in the sights he could make out.

"So this...is where you two live?" he mused, "Beautiful...looks very quaint and homely."

"We'll give you a tour later when you're fixed up, if you like." Knuckles offered, "Maybe you can join the tribe too. We're always open for new members."

"How very kind of you." Dimitri said graciously.

The two were quickly interrupted as Julie-Su ran over to them, having spotted them entering the village. She'd been outside the tent while Sadie had been talking with Relic.

"Knuckles, Shade, did you find the distress signal?" she asked.

"Right here." Knuckles motioned to Dimitri, "Could you and any other tech-guys patch him up? He's very badly damaged and could do with your expertise."

"Sure, no problem!" Julie-Su replied, "Only...who is he? WHAT is he, even?" she added, her eyes widening at the sight of the robot head-in-a-bubble in her leader's hands.

"We can explain everything as you repair him." Shade answered.

"Nah, I'll wait. You two are needed by the prison tent." the pink echidna explained, "Sadie caught a trespasser while you were gone."

"She did?" Knuckles exclaimed, his eyes widening, "Whoa, we're gone five minutes and our daughter's already protecting the village! She really WAS ready!"

"We'll go see this trespasser. You take care of our find here." Shade declared, handing Dimitri over to Julie-Su.

The she-echidna looked down at the robot head in her hands with a mixture of disgust and puzzlement. What was she even meant to make out of something like this? Dimitri just glanced up at her with his singular optic. He was smiling for some reason.

"How exciting, I'm found by echidna guardians and they have a prisoner to grill." he purred, "What a day...this is turning out to be."

"Seriously sir, you're creepy." Julie-Su muttered as she carried him away, "But I'm sure some of our guys can patch you up again..."

She carried him away, leaving Knuckles and Shade to attend to their daughter. Had she caught a potential S.T.I.N.G. agent? If so, they knew exactly what to do with him or her! They'd leave the organization with one agent less walking free! They entered the tent, making Sadie jump in surprise but she quickly regained herself.

"Mom, dad! You're back!" she blurted, "I caught a trespasser!"

"So we've been told." Knuckles muttered, glaring at the tied-up Relic, who glanced back at him timidly.

"G-g-greetings." she stammered, "Am I-I-I c-correct in assuming y-you are the leaders of this t-tribe?"

"Unfortunately for you." Knuckles growled, "Explain yourself! Why are you trespassing in our village?"

"I think she might be a spy!" Sadie informed, "I found a map of Downunda in her backpack and she tells me she wants to "chronicle the Chaos Emeralds". Sounds suspicious, don't you think?"

"Quite." Shade agreed, coldly, "So tell us, intruder, why are you here? What were you doing when our daughter caught you?"

"I swear I wasn't spying!" Relic pleaded, "I'd be a terrible spy if I ever tried it! I admit that I should have made my presence known, instead of hiding, but I just wanted to make some initial observations. I'm just a humble archaeologist from Mercia, Madame Guardian. My name is Relic and I swear in the name of our Queen that I am no spy. Take a lie detector and you'll see, if you have one."

"So you're just an archaeologist on a trip through the country." Shade acknowledged, "It would explain the map and why you just happen to be passing by..."

"What did you mean when you told our daughter you wanted to "chronicle" the Chaos Emeralds?" Knuckles inquired, "Do you basically just want to study about them and share that information?"

"For educational purposes." Relic insisted, "I would never come here with intent to steal them. I would NEVER steal from the villages I visit!"

"So that's it then? Nothing else?"

"Absolutely sir."

"You swear that that's it? You're just an archaeologist on an expedition?"

"I swear it! I can't make that point any more clear!" Relic cried, "Please, I beg of you, let me go! Please!"

Her eyes began to well up and she snivelled, unable to help herself. Tears rolled down her cheeks as far took hold of her. Knuckles took all of this in while noticing her crying. If this really was a spy of any kind, her crying was too convincing to be faked and nothing about her body language suggested she was lying. He didn't see any reason to disbelieve her. This was clearly an innocent woman who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and was scared for her life. He nodded slowly.

"I believe you." he said softly, "Shade, cut her loose. She's innocent."

Shade obliged, taking out one of her blades to cut Relic's ropes. In one swift slice, the pika was freed and she graciously lowered her arms, relieved to be able to move them again. She rubbed her wrists better and dried her eyes. Sadie looked down at the floor in shame, disgusted with herself for being so hostile.

"I just interrogated an innocent archaeologist..." she muttered bitterly, "Fine guardian I'M turning out to be!"

"Your mother and I have always said you're too impulsive for your own good." Knuckles agreed, "But I suppose we should've taught you about not treating everybody outside of the tribe as an intruder."

"We are SO sorry for the way we've treated you Relic." Shade insisted, retracting her helmet back into her headband so Relic could see on her face that she was being sincere, "Please, whatever you do, don't think that this behaviour represents our tribe as a whole. We're not usually this hostile..."

"No, no Madame, I understand completely." Relic said kindly, "We do currently live in a world where a bunch of cultists who worship Eggman are trying to kill his majesty, King Sonic the Hedgehog. I imagine you can't help but be cautious. I didn't exactly help my case by..."

"Wait a minute, you know of S.T.I.N.G.?" Sadie interrupted.

"Oh balderdash young lady, how could I not?" Relic snorted, "You can't step five steps outside your home without somebody talking about those charlatans these days! It sickens me to think that any crazy lunatic out there would worship Dr. Eggman and think that Sonic is the real villain out there!"

"You're telling me." Knuckles sighed, "He saved the whole world from Dr. Finitevus's mad scheme to become Enerjak and this is the thanks he gets..."

"Indeed." Relic said, "Anyway, there's actually something I wish to ask you about. Have either of you ever heard of the Chaos Gauntlet?"

Knuckles and Shade looked at each other, puzzled.

"Never heard of it." Shade said.

"I've only heard stories about it." Knuckles said, "But I always thought they were just that: stories. How do you know, Relic?"

"Archaeologists read a lot of stories." Relic replied, "It's where we get our basics for research. And I believe that all legends and myths have a basis in fact."

"Can't argue with that." Knuckles said with a shrug.

"What is the Chaos Gauntlet?" Sadie asked.

"I'd have thought you'd all be familiar with such an artefact given this country's history with Chaos Emeralds..." Relic murmured, "OK then, the most I can tell you is that the Chaos Gauntlet, as the stories may have told you, is a mystical power source that was built in ancient times to harness the power of the Chaos Emeralds. It's supposedly been built using a few emeralds as this was before they were merged into seven. It's been described as a huge glove that you wear over your hand and it can carry Chaos Emeralds. By itself, the gauntlet has the ability to enhance strength and allow the wearer to throw devastating punches."

"Sounds like YOUR kind of thing dad." Sadie teased, elbowing him playfully.

"Sadie, don't interrupt." Knuckles muttered. He turned back to Relic and said: "The stories I know spoke of such an artefact. It's said that if you combine the Chaos Emeralds with the power of the Chaos Gauntlet..."

"...you could become godly." both he and Relic said in unison.

"Godly?" Shade and Sadie echoed with astonishment.

"Oh goodness, yes madam." Relic confirmed, "It's been heavily rumoured that those who have a fully powered Chaos Gauntlet could potentially wipe out all enemies with a mere snap of their fingers," she snapped her own fingers to emphasize her point, "Which is precisely why, as legend says, it was sealed away and never used. The ancient echidnas didn't want that kind of power to go to their heads or fall into enemy hands. Thus, nobody knows what the true power of the Chaos Gauntlet really is. All that's known is that it could carry seven emeralds, one of each colour, and with that power, you were pretty much a god."

"And you want to find this thing why exactly?" Knuckles asked, "Don't tell me YOU wanna find out what it's like to be a god!"

"Oh rubbish and poppycock, what reason could I have to make myself omniscient and all-powerful?" Relic dismissed, "No, I only wish to prove it exists as a lot of my university colleagues aren't convinced and think that my theories on it being real are a load of codswallop."

"I didn't know people in Mercia spoke funny." Sadie giggled.

"Don't be rude dear." Shade hissed, "So is your trip basically about just finding the Chaos Gauntlet and proving it's real? That's fine I guess but didn't you consider the consequences of such a find? You said that the stories say the gauntlet was supposedly sealed away so nobody could use it. Well if you prove it exists, won't we have a bunch of people invading Downunda to get their hands on it?"

"Especially an organization like S.T.I.N.G.?" Knuckles added sternly, "If you blabber to everybody about this thing, they'll no doubt hear about it and want to get it for themselves!"

Relic gasped, clasping her hands over her mouth in horror.

"Great heavens, I never considered that!" she exclaimed, "Oh my, how could I be so narrow-minded? Noble guardians, I'm so sorry for not giving my actions some thought before I came here!"

"Don't be." Shade said softly, "We're only Mobian after all. It's in our nature to think of one thing and not consider the big picture. Although..."

She looked over at Knuckles as her mind began to wander. Her husband seemed equally as thoughtful as he looked over to her. They both thought the same thing and came to the same conclusion.

"...what if WE used it?" they both thought.

"That's a great idea!" Sadie cried eagerly, "If we find the Chaos Gauntlet, we could use its power to stop S.T.I.N.G. once and for all!"

"Oh heavens, I do hope you're not actually contemplating wiping them out of existence?!" Relic shrieked, horrified.

"No! We're not murderers like they are!" Knuckles snapped, "We'd never consider that! Instead, we could wipe all their resources out of existence. Imagine making all their hideouts and headquarters disappear, and whatever Eggman technology they're using. With that kind of power, S.T.I.N.G. would be helpless to stop us!"

"I think our archaeologist friend may have found a way to put an end to their operations for good." Shade agreed, smiling with delight over the thought of using the gauntlet against the Eggman cultists.

"That could work." Relic said slowly, tapping her chin, "So I suppose I could kill two birds with one stone if we found it; I can prove the gauntlet's existence to my colleagues and we can defeat those Eggman-worshipping blighters."

"Indeed." Shade said, silencing her daughter's giggles at Relic's last word with a warning look, "But once we've used it, I suggest we destroy it afterwards. That way, it can't be used by any evil doers in the future."

"Sounds like a plan." Knuckles said, "Very well, Relic; you will come with me and Shade to find this gauntlet."

"What about me?" Sadie asked, "Can't I come?"

She clearly wanted to make up for her treatment of Relic.

"No sweetheart." Knuckles said, "We need someone to guard the village while we're gone."

"Why, so I can prosecute another innocent?" Sadie said bitterly.

"Maybe the next person you prosecute will turn out NOT to be innocent." Knuckles retorted, "At the very least, this experience might have taught you to not be so openly hostile to outsiders."

Sadie frowned, still convinced that she would screw this up again in some way. How was she supposed to know if anybody caught trespassing was innocent or not? At worst, she could give the tribe a bad image by making innocent people think they're savages by constantly accusing them. She wanted to go with her parents instead of staying on guard duty but she knew that they wouldn't change their minds. Experience had taught her that her parents weren't much of negotiators. When they made a decision, it was usually final. Knuckles and Shade were about to leave the tent, keen to get started on the search for this supposed gauntlet but somebody quickly ran in to see them. It was Julie-Su.

"Guardians! That weird, robot-head-thing you bought here has been repaired." she reported, "The damage done to him wasn't too bad so it didn't take us long to patch him up."

"Weird robot-head-thing?" Sadie asked, puzzled.

"That's good to hear." Knuckles said brightly, "We'll go over to him and let him know what's happening."

"Why, what IS happening?" Julie-Su asked.

"We'll explain everything when we get there." Shade replied, "Let's go."

Everybody filed out of the tent to see the newly-repaired Dimitri. While on the way, Knuckles filled on Julie-Su on what went on with Relic and how she was declared to be innocent. Julie-Su had been quick to apologize for pointing a gun at the pika but Relic had repeated her insistence that it was OK and was just relieved everybody believed her now. A few minutes later, the echidnas and their guest arrived at the laboratory. It was a small building and couldn't match-up to an actual laboratory, especially the one at Royal

HQ, but it was all the village needed and was still perfectly functional for repairs and development of new weapons or technology to help the tribe out. Knuckles liked to think of it as short, sweet and simple, nothing too fancy and something that got the job done just like that. He, Shade, Sadie, Julie and Relic gathered around the workbench that Dimitri was sitting on, looking a lot happier now he was fixed and could move his limbs again. The glass sphere he was housed in was no longer cracked and the damage done by the gunshot was completely repaired. Relic adjusted her glasses, reassuring herself that she wasn't seeing things.

"How extraordinary..." she murmured to herself. This day was just getting more and more interesting, wasn't it?!

Dimitri's optics fixed on the guardians, happy to see them again.

"Greetings fellow guardians." he said jovially, "Your people were able to fix me up just as you promised. I do not know how I can repay you for your hospitality. I would have run out of power and died back in that forest if you hadn't been so kind."

"Don't mention it Dimitri." Knuckles said modestly, "We're glad to help."

"Dad...forgive me if I sound rude but...WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?!" Sadie exclaimed, pointing at Dimitri. The old cyborg frowned, clearly offended.

"The source of the distress signal." Shade explained, "His name is Dimitri and he was attacked by S.T.I.N.G. because he refused to join them. He was very badly damaged so we brought him here to get him repaired."

"And unlike you, young lady, they didn't feel the need to make such comments on my appearance." Dimitri spat, "One would think your parents would've taught you some manners."

"We DID." Knuckles muttered, "But it often slips your mind, doesn't it, Sadie?"

"Sorry dad, sorry mom." Sadie said, meekly.

She approached Dimitri with an apologetic look in her eyes.

"Sorry for my reaction Dimitri." she said solemnly, "It's just...I've never seen anything like you before. It just came out."

"That's quite alright my child." Dimitri said softly, "I'm used to it anyway. So, you're the daughter of these esteemed young guardians?"

"Sure am. My name is Sadie." Sadie introduced, "I hope you like it in our tribe Dimitri. That is, if you're gonna be joining us."

"We'll talk about that later." Knuckles said quickly, "We're gonna be going shortly. We just came to let you know that we're going off with our guest, Relic the Pika, to find the legendary Chaos Gauntlet. Don't worry about being left alone, we'll have the tribe..."

"I do beg your pardon, guardian, but...did you say the Chaos Gauntlet?" the robot-echidna head asked, his curiosity clearly piqued.

"By Jove, do you know of it as well?" Relic inquired.

"Do I know of the Chaos Gauntlet!" Dimitri scoffed, "In my day, that thing was a bedtime story for puggles such as myself! My family have been trying to uncover that artefact for years, but with no success. They even believed one of my ancestors may have had a hand in sealing it away all those years ago. Well it maybe a legend to many echidnas out there, I believe that it's real and have longed to find it. Such a discovery would've made me the biggest name in echidna history."

"Well we're gonna find it so we may use it to stop S.T.I.N.G. for good." Knuckles explained, "Given what they did to you, I imagine you'd appreciate that."

"Perhaps, if it's no trouble at all, I could attend you on your quest?" Dimitri offered, "It's the least I can offer in return for your kindness and generosity in saving my life."

"You sure you don't want a rest?" Shade asked

"Nonsense, I feel fit as a fiddle, as the saying goes." Dmitri replied, "It helps when you're a cyborg."

"Can't argue with that." Julie-Su noted, flexing her robotic arm.

"Very well." Knuckles said, "Dimitri, you will accompany me, Shade and Relic in finding this gauntlet. Sadie, you and Julie-Su stay to guard the village."

"Okay." Sadie said, "Take care, Dad."

"We will." Shade said, "We've handled more dangerous situations than this."

With nothing more to say, Knuckles and Shade left the lab to begin searching for the legendary gauntlet. Relic and Dimitri followed them out, leaving Sadie and Julie-Su behind. The moment they left, the two echidnas looked at one another as if wondering what each other was going to say.

"Soooo...what IS the Chaot Gauntlet exactly?" Julie-Su asked, running a hand through her hair in puzzlement.

Sadie almost giggled. It hadn't occurred to her until now that Julie-Su had missed the whole talk with Relic in the prison tent so she wouldn't have any idea what they were talking about with Dimitri. She quickly filled her in on what she and her parents had been told. To her surprise, Julie-Su's reaction was once of concern rather than

delight. She looked uneasy as she mulled over everything Sadie had told her.

"I dunno, should we actually allow ourselves to use such an artefact? If it even exists?" Julie questioned, "I mean, we'll essentially be playing god with that kind of power! What if we...let it get to our heads? What if Knuckles ends up becoming another Enerjak with it?"

"Oh don't be silly Aunt Julie, dad would NEVER become another Enerjak like my bastard of a great-uncle, Finitevus, did!" Sadie dismissed, "We're only gonna use it to wipe out all of S.T.I.N.G' s resources and that's it. Don't see how that'll give us a god complex."

"I still think we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves." Julie-Su said, worriedly, "I can't count how many stories I've heard of people who become all-powerful and then just snap and go crazy. Lest we forget what happened to your grandpa Ix when he let all his power get to his head..."

Sadie nodded. Her mother had told her much about her late grandfather and what a tyrant he'd been, trying to lower Angel Island and slaughtering anyone who got in his way while abusing her as a child. She had been relieved that she'd never know him given his fate in which he'd been forever condemned into the void.

For now, all Sadie could do was carry out her duties and wait for her parents to return. Would they find the gauntlet? Did it even exist? Or was it just a story and this whole thing was for nothing? She would find out. With any luck, it wouldn't take too long...

So our heroes are on the look-out for the Chaos Gauntlet. Does it exist? And if so, will they find it? What will happen when Abyss makes her move? Will she strike when it's too late for the Knuckles Tribe? Find out next time as we journey to find this legendary artefact...

Oh and yes people, I know, the Chaos Gauntlet is an obvious reference to the Infinity Gauntlet from the Marvel Universe. That's the idea! XD

Valuable Relics Chapter 4

15 Years Later: Chapter 3: Valuable Relics

Chapter 4: Relic Hunting

Abyss the Squid was giddy with excitement. Everything was going according to plan! Any minute now, she'd be able to play her part in stealing the Chaos and Master Emeralds and bring them back over to her island headquarters for pick-up! If only she didn't have to wait for that blasted Dimitri to give her the signal. She wanted to go now! But the cephalopod pirate knew that she couldn't. They couldn't mess this up, not when everything was going so well at the moment.

The pirate captain was currently in her ship, the very ship that had once belonged to Captain Whisker before she'd taken over his crew. After Dimitri had been found by Knuckles and Shade, she'd gone back to the ship so she could pipe up the crew and prepare to attack once the signal was given. Every pirate was on the alert with weapons in hand and ready for action all over the ship. Many of them were just as eager to get into battle as Abyss herself. In order to pass the time, Abyss had decided to get out her communications device, which looked like an old calculator with a flip-up screen, and make a quick call to Scorn to report on how everything was going. She was put through immediately and the S.T.I.N.G. leader spoke to her.

"You have a report already?" he asked.

"Sure do boss." Abyss informed, "Dimitri is in. The dumb guardians bought his lie hook, line and sinker! They've taken him to their village and as we speak, he's now leading them to find this treasure he's heard of called the "Chaos Gauntlet". He tells me it can use the power of the Chaos Emeralds and give you godly powers. Once they find it, he's gonna take it from them and bring it to us."

"And nobody suspects he works for us?"

"Not in the slightest. I bet they don't suspect him because he's an echidna or something."

There was a brief silence as Scorn took this in. Then he replied.

"So when do you and your crew plan to move in and get the emeralds?"

"Once the old man gives me the signal." Abyss answered, "He'll send me a message consisting of only beeps to let me know when we can go. Me and my shipmates will ransack the village and get as many residents to bug as possible while Breakdown combs the place for the emeralds. Shouldn't be too hard to find them given their unique energy signatures."

"Sounds like you're well in order." Scorn purred approvingly, "Do not contact me again until the mission is a success. I eagerly await the outcome."

"I bet you do boss. Abyss, out." the squid concluded, switching off her communicator.

She pocketed the device and sat back down at a table in which she had a map of Dowunda rolled out. She gazed at it studiously, wondering if she could make Breakdown's job of finding them easier.

"Now I know this map's up-to-date with Downunda presently, hence why Angel Island isn't here anymore." she murmured, "I know the tribe's in this area so if the emeralds are in Downunda with those so-called "guardians", they have to be close by. I doubt they're IN the village itself, that'd be too obvious and I know for a fact the echidnas wouldn't be that stupid..."

As she studied the map, her first-mate, Sting the Jellyfish, entered the room. He was carrying a pistol that resembled the old Flintlock design that pirates once wielded but this model was modernized and

could fire laser shots instead of bullets, as well as shoot more rounds than just one at a time. He saluted her as he walked in.

"Ma'am, the crew are eager to attack." he informed, "When do we move in?"

"When the old fart in the glass bubble tells us to." Abyss snapped, "Not a second before, OK?"

"Got it captain." Sting replied, "I won't ask again."

"Good." Abyss muttered, "It gets irritating after awhile when you keep coming in to say the same shit over and over."

"Sorry captain." Sting replied, "Still though, I must say...attacking a defenseless village while the guardians are gone? And stealing the Chaos Emeralds while we're at it too? Forgive me if it sounds hypocritical but...it really ain't good form, is it?"

His response was that of a slow turn of a head and a dark smile spread across the lips of his captain as she glanced over at him. He felt nervous, not liking the way she was looking at him like that.

"Good form Mr. Sting...?" Abyss growled through her forced smile.

She then exploded into a fury as she stood up and flipped the table over effortlessly with her tentacles. Sting jumped in alarm, wondering if he was about to be shot through the head for that.

"BLAST GOOD FORM!" the enraged captain screamed, "DID CAPTAIN WHISKER SHOW GOOD FORM WHEN HIS CREW USED ME AS A SEX TOY?!"

Sting was positively terrified. He knew Abyss could be impatient and always liked action, but he often forgot how easily she could fly off the handle. If he wasn't careful around her, it could cost him his life, if this instance did not.

"N-n-no." Sting stammered, trying to suppress his instinct to zap his Captain with his tentacles in defence, "Of course not, Captain. What they did was horrendous. They got what was coming when you killed them."

"Indeed!" Abyss hissed venomously, "We pirates have no need for 'good form', especially not for these fools we're dealing with now! If you dare question my strategies again, Mr Sting, you are going to be zapped by your own tentacles and then learn what it was like for Pinocchio when he got swallowed by a fish! And I hope it'll be a shark!"

Sting gulped, hoping the captain wasn't being serious though his gut-feeling told him she probably was. She often meant what she said, especially if it was grisly and gory. The jellyfish was so frightened that his head started wobbling like an actual plate of jelly. He gripped it to stop it shaking, blushing with embarrassment. He always hated it when that happened.

"Y-y-y-yes ma'am." the marine Mobian stammered, "I shan't do it again."

"Good show." Abyss muttered, "Now piss off, I'm bust studying the map of Downunda."

The first-mate bowed and was about to leave but to Abyss's surprise, she ended up reciving the tell-tale sign that it was time to attack. Her communications device was beeping and she opened the screen up to see the screen flashing red in time with the beeping. It was Dimitri's signal. The robot-head had the ability to send messages and signals to his comrades just with a thought thanks to a sattelite link built in his head that gave him access to all communications equipment that S.T.I.N.G. owned. What was even more impressive was that Dimitri could send these signals without having to activate anything or stop to raise a tentacle or anything. He could be talking to somebody right now and they'd never know he was sending signals of some kind. Knuckles and Shade would never know it was him that had alerted Abyss and her crew that it was time to attack.

The squid's beak curled into a grin of excitement as she switched the signal off to stop it beeping and pocketed her device again.

"On second thoughts, stay where you are." she ordered, "There's our signal to go! The attack on the Knuckles Tribe can finally begin!"

She and Sting left the room and emerged onto the decks to announce to the crew it was time to attack. The pirate captain could already see the glorious carnage that would come from their assault now. Wouldn't S.T.I.N.G. be proud of her and her crew!

Meanwhile, Knuckles, Shade, Relic and Dimitri were continuing their search for the Chaos Gauntlet. Relic was in the lead, a map open in her hands.

"Now then, for a place to start, I'd say where we are now will work." Relic said as she observed the map, "The rumours on where the Chaos Gauntlet is headed correspond with areas nearby where we're currently standing."

"Would you say her map's accurate Dimitri?" Knuckles asked.

The robot-heard stood up as tall as his tentacles would stretch and he peered at the map Relic was holding. The pika held it out for him to properly see, patiently waiting for him to look it over and make his observation. He nodded.

"Absolutely. It matches Downunda's current form." Dimitri declared, "And as she said, the rumours as to where the Gauntlet is located refer to areas near here. The unfortunate thing is that nobody's ever been able to pinpoint EXACTLY where it is so we maybe searching for a while."

"Not necessarily." Knuckles corrected, "Me and Shade have a strong connection to the Master Emerald, so we have a way of sensing if Chaos Emeralds or the Master Emerald itself is nearby."

"Comes with being a guardian." Shade remarked dryly.

"How fortunate for us then." Dimitri purred, "The Gauntlet itself was made out of Chaos Emeralds so if you two can sense them..."

"Then maybe you can direct us to the gauntlet!" Relic exclaimed, "Huh, guess we won't need the map after all."

"Keep hold of it anyway." Shade suggested, "We may still need it, you never know."

Relic nodded as she folded the map up and stashed it back in her backpack.

"So guardians, can you..."sense" the Gauntlet right now?" she inquired.

"Maybe tricky as we're used to the Chaos and Master Emeralds." Knuckles warned, "We could get confused with their signatures. Still, here goes."

Knuckles and Shade both closed their eyes and calmed their minds, allowing themselves to feel the nature around them and touching upon their innate connection to the power of Chaos. For a few moments, they felt nothing distinct, but then, they felt something; something distinct and unfamiliar.

"We sense something." Shade said, keeping her eyes closed, "It's unfamiliar to us; it could be the Gauntlet."

"Which way?" Relic and Dimitri asked together.

Knuckles and Shade focused in on the source of the presence; it seemed to be coming from north-east of their location.

"That way." Knuckles answered, pointing in the direction he and Shade could detect the energy signature.

Dimitri and Relic followed the guardian's direction. He was pointing ahead to what seemed like more stretch of forest. It didn't seem like there'd be anything that way but that was the thing with forests. With so many trees and other growth around, there was no telling where anything was until you started looking through it. They decided to follow on from Knuckles and Shade as they took the lead. With their Chaos sense, they'd find the Gauntlet in no time at all. It seemed incredible that after being hidden for centuries, the relic would finally be unearthed. What would the ancient Guardians think if they could see this now?

Knuckles and Shade headed on in the direction they had sensed the unfamiliar energy signature with Dimitri and Relic following closely behind. For a while, nobody said a word as they continued their trek. They just pressed on, heading straight and stepping over fallen trees, rocks and broken branches. There was the distant sound of Mobini birds singing to each other. On several trees and under rocks, Mobini insects crawled around seeking food and shelter. The hot Downunda sun beat down on the lush vegetation, creating beautiful sun-streaks that shone through the trees. For all four Mobians, it was one of those rare times where they truly got to feel what it was like to be in tune with nature. Nothing modern or technological, just peace and harmony all around with the world in natural order. Relic could barely keep herself from smiling in awe.

"I never knew Downunda could be so...beautiful." she mused. Of all the places she could've chosen to go on an expedition, she couldn't be more grateful she'd chosen this country.

"Everybody who comes here says that." Knuckles sighed, smiling in agreement, "And who can blame them? At times, this place can feel like paradise with how peaceful it gets."

"And Eggman wanted to destroy it all by making his robot utopia." Shade muttered, "Why would anyone ever want to destroy environments like this? Getting rid of places that make Mobius special and beautiful would just make a dull world for us all to live in."

"Try telling that to those fanatics trying to carry on his legacy my dear." Dimitri scoffed, "They have no appreciation for peace and nature either."

"Which is why when we get that gauntlet, we'll be able to put a stop to their plans and keep the world as beautiful as it is." Knuckles declared, "And it seems that might be pretty soon. I can feel the strange presence getting stronger."

"I feel it too." Shade added, "We should be arriving at its location in a matter of minutes."

"By Jove. I'm quite positively giddy..." Relic said, clasping her hands together with anticipation, "We're about to make the discovery of a life time! I don't know how I can possibly contain myself!"

"Well take it easy, we're not there yet." Knuckles warned, "Besides, it could be something else entirely, we don't know. But we're going to find out..."

Relic obeyed, doing her best to keep her excitement contained until they reached the ancient artefact. Dimitri just trailed behind, wanting to keep himself small and unnoticed in case he somehow gave himself away. He was content to just let Knuckles, Shade and Relic take the lead while he followed. He was already planning what to do to take the gauntlet once they found it. It made him feel bad that he'd have to do this to two kindly echidnas who showed him compassion and welcomed him with open arms but S.T.I.N.G had made it impossible for him to refuse their offers. Like it or not, he had to do his task...

Meanwhile, back in the village, Sadie had decided to pass the time by meditating. However, this did not mean she was neglecting her duty of guarding the village. This meditation was using the Chaos powers she had inherited from her parents to sense anyone near the village and whether they might be good or evil. This way, she wouldn't embarrass herself like with Relic. This power wasn't as

potent as her parents, but it did allow detection of life around her. She could feel all sorts of life from crawling insects to local villagers. It was a surreal sensation, but one she quite enjoyed as she felt in tune with nature and a close connection to her people.

Just then, she sensed someone approaching her; at first, she thought it might be Julie-Su, but her senses told her it might be a hostile. She opened her eyes and looked around her.

"First day on the job, I prosecute an innocent archaeologist." the teen-echidna muttered, "Who am I gonna be facing this time? An interior decorator?"

Sadie breathed in slowly and approached the bushes, already slowing her approach from before. She was being more cautious instead of just leaping in like last time. She also wasn't going to be confrontational to begin with.

"You can come out." she said, as softly as she could, just in case it wasn't a hostile, "Don't be afraid."

She felt a cruel chuckle, followed by a voice that sounded awfully familiar, despite not hearing it in 10 years.

"Oh, I'm not afraid. In fact, it's you who should be afraid, little guardian."

From the bushes stepped Abyss the Squid, her beak curved upward in cruel delight. Sadie balled her hands into fists, anger rising within her, like a snake from long grass. The squid may have grown since last time they met, but Sadie recognized her straight away.

"YOU!" she shouted, adopting a fighting stance.

"So, the wittle crybaby guardian is all grown up." Abyss said tauntingly, "I guess you decided to be a hooker instead, judging by your clothing."

"Who are you to judge my fashion sense when you walk around looking like some wannabe Eggman cosplayer?" Sadie retorted, "Look at you! You'd fit right into a lunatic Eggman fanclub!"

Then suddenly, it dawned on her on why the squid's outfit bore a similar design aesthetic to the deceased doctor.

"Oh no...please don't tell me you're a member of S.T.I.N.G now!" she shrieked.

"Oh so you DO have a brain! And here I thought the beating I gave you all them years ago might've damaged a few cells!" Abyss sneered, "Yes, as you've so accurately pointed out, I am a member of S.T.I.N.G. I'd say out of us two, I got the better end of the stick. I have cybernetic enhancements," she boasted, showing off the metal tips of her tentacles, "Advanced weaponry and technology at my beck and call and the finest crew a pirate could ask for! What have you got in comparison? That silly headband?"

"No, I have an entire tribe of echidnas that look VERY unhappy to see you." Sadie retorted.

That was when Abyss found herself surrounded by echidnas, all wielding weapons of some kind. Julie-Su was leading them, her twin-barreled pistol aimed straight at the squid's head. The villagers had seen Sadie and Abyss confronting each other and Julie-Su had been quick to act, bringing the tribe's best warriors with her to handle this intruder. As arrogant as she was, the marine Mobian knew it would be stupid to try and attack so many echidnas at once, especially as many were pointing guns at her. She slowly raised her hands, but kept her face neutral. Sadie smirked, folding her arms confidently.

"NOW who's got the short end of the stick?" she taunted.

"Gotta say, the Knuckles Clan wasn't expecting an actual S.T.I.N.G. agent to show up and proudly declare herself as such." Julie-Su scoffed, "We were warned you guys were more subtle than that. Guess their reports were wildly exaggerated."

"The guardians will be very pleased when they come home to find out we've captured a S.T.I.N.G. agent." an echidna with black hair and maroon coloured fur said with delight.

"You bet, Remington!" Sadie agreed, "Seize her and tie her up in the prison tent!" she ordered.

"A tent?! You guys have a prison TENT?!" Abyss crowed, doubling over in laughter, "You guys are more behind the times than I thought!"

"We'll see how funny you think this is when you're tied to a pole and gagged." Julie-Su snorted, keeping her pistol aimed at Abyss in case she tried anything.

The echidnas approached Abyss, ready to grab her. Funny enough, the squid didn't try to resist. She just allowed two huge, beefy echidnas two grab her arms and force them behind her back so they could lead her away to the tent. But as they were about to take her away, the pirate smiled a dark, confident smile at Sadie and Julie-Su. The two girls stared at her in confusion.

"Um...why are you smiling like that?" Sadie asked nervously.

"Didn't it occur to you morons that it seems...odd that I came here alone?" Abyss sneered, "I mean, I DID say to you I have the finest crew a pirate could ask for..."

Sadie's face went pale with shock as realization hit her like a punch to the face. And then something DID hit her in the face. She and several echidnas were swatted away like flies as something huge and metallic lashed out from nowhere and hit them, making Abyss laugh with glee.

"Good boy, Breakdown!" she said, as the barracuda emerged from the bushes, along with Abyss' crew, Sting leading them. Breakdown growled with delight, lowering his head, so that Abyss could pat him.

"What is that thing?!" Julie-Su cried.

"That 'thing' is Breakdown." Abyss said, stroking Breakdown's snout as he growled menacingly, "So, if you don't fancy ending up in his belly, I suggest you surrender."

"NEVER!" Julie-Su cried and opened fire at Breakdown, but the bullets just pinged off the barracuda's robotic armour as if they were milk duds.

Breakdown smirked, a rare expression for the barracuda to sport, and made a noise that sounded like a metallic laugh, mocking Julie-Su for her efforts without even saying a word. The pink echidna growled in annoyance, seeing her weapon was useless. She put it away and cracked her knuckles as she prepared to just use her bare hands on the roboticized barracuda. Sadie quickly stopped her by grabbing her arm and holding her back.

"Wait Auntie-Su, I think I know what we're up against here!" the teenage echidna cried, "King Sonic told us about the main five members of S.T.I.N.G. He said Breakdown was one of them. He's very strong and hard to hurt but if I were to guess, he might have a weak spot. Maybe the inside of his mouth!"

"So maybe I can try to shoot him in his mouth." Julie-Su murmured, seeing what Sadie was getting at, "He won't make that target easy for us but we can try."

"I'll help you take him down." Sadie declared, "The rest of you, take out Abyss and her crew! We'll show these creeps what happens when you mess with the Knuckles Clan!"

"It looks like I'll have to teach you another lesson about what happens when you mess with me, kid." Abyss said, "Very well, then. Breakdown, chew up the pink one and any others who prove too feisty."

The barracuda nodded and lunged towards his prey with a vicious snarl. The tribe all fled in different directions to avoid being snatched up by Breakdown's jaws, causing him to simply hit the ground where they had been standing. Abyss's crew all charged in with their guns blazing, shooting at anybody in their sights. On their captain's orders, their guns were set to stun, not kill, as they wanted to capture the echidnas. Some of the tribesmen were hit and rendered unconscious in a single zap, collapsing onto the ground. Others were able to dodge and shoot back with their own guns, which were also set to stun. Knuckles had insisted that anyone with a gun shoots to kill ONLY when necessary, but this situation didn't call for any needless killing so they were content to just stun the attacking pirates. When this was over, they would imprison all stunned attackers for questioning later.

As the echidnas and pirates engaged in their back-and-forth stunning match, Sadie, Julie-Su and Remington were all ganging up on Breakdown. Julie-Su and Remington were both shooting him at the same time while Sadie was climbing onto his back and punching him repeatedly. The guns did nothing to Breakdown, but that wasn't the plan for now. They were trying to keep him busy so Sadie could hopefully do some damage and maybe get Breakdown to open his mouth and leave himself vulnerable for a shot. Breakdown raised his tail and brought it crashing down towards Julie and Remington, but he missed as they threw themselves to the side to avoid being hit. Sadie had to hold on tight to the Robian's back as he tried to tail whip her friends. Breakdown then turned his head and spotted Sadie holding onto him. He growled angrily, making the message clear to the teen guardian: "Get off me!" Sadie refused to move so Breakdown tried to do it himself, opening his jaws so he could grab her and swallow her whole, trapping her inside his body so he could carry her back to base.

But that was what Sadie had wanted him to do. Smirking confidently, she jumped off his back so Breakdown ended up biting himself, leaving teeth marks in his armour. He let out a roar of pain, giving Julie-Su and Remington the perfect opportunity to shoot at his open

mouth. They both fired, hitting him squarely in the back of his throat. The laser shots caused Breakdown to howl in anguish, feeling like his throat was on fire. He swayed from side-to-side, coughing and spluttering from the attack he'd received. Sadie punched the air in triumph, glad her plan had worked.

"Oh yeah, now THAT'S how you do it!" she cried.

"Don't get too excited Sadie." Julie-Su muttered grimly, "That may have been his weak spot, but I don't think our shots were enough. He's still standing."

True enough, Breakdown was indeed still active. There was smoke drifting out of his jaws, but otherwise he didn't seem like he was going down anytime soon. If anything, he just looked even angrier than before. Remington swore.

"We hit his weak spot and he doesn't go down! What do we have to do to finish this guy?!" he cried.

"Hit him again is all I can suggest." Sadie said, sounding unsure of herself, "But we don't wanna do it too many times or we might end up killing him. As dad taught me: killing isn't the guardian way."

"Unless absolutely necessary." Julie-Su agreed, remembering one of the tribe's most scared creeds, "I'm with you Sadie. Not even this monster is worth breaking that rule for. We'll try one more shot to the mouth, but that's it. Hopefully, it'll be enough..."

"Hey, you!" Sadie yelled at Breakdown, sticking out her tongue. It was a silly trick, but it should work. It did; Breakdown lunged forward to swallow her.

"Sadie, move!" Remington yelled, as he and Julie-Su ran out of the way, but Sadie didn't move. Breakdown reached her and clamped his jaws on her - or tried to, because he suddenly found he couldn't close his mouth. In fact, it was opening wider. Sadie was using her strength to hold Breakdown's jaws open. She wasn't as strong as her

parents yet, but it was enough. Breakdown tried to close his mouth but Sadie refused to give in, her muscles screaming as she kept her arms and legs as rigid as she could.

"NOW!" she yelled.

Julie-Su and Remington could see what Sadie was planning and took aim with their guns. They aimed past the echidna so they wouldn't hit her by accident. They opened fire, the shoots whizzing past Sadie and into Breakdown's mouth. As soon as the shots him him, Breakdown bellowed in pain, allowing Sadie to leap out of his mouth so she didn't have to keep it open anymore. He reared up, smoke billowing out of his mouth and wailing a thunderous wail of anguish. His whole throat felt like it had fallen apart. The damage sustained from being shot in the mouth twice was too much for Breakdown to bear so he swayed to one side and collapsed heavily onto the ground. The trio of echidnas approached him slowly, fearing the worst.

"We didn't...did we?" Sadie asked nervously.

Remington approached Breakdown, smoke still drifting from the barracuda's mouth. Breakdown wasn't moving, but his optics were still shining. He was also making low, pained groaning sounds and making metallic coughing sounds. That was enough for Remington to satisfy his curiosity. He turned to the girls.

"We didn't kill him, luckily. He's just too damaged to fight on." he announced.

"Thank Chaos for that." Sadie sighed, wiping her forehead, "I was worried I'd have to explain to mom and dad how I killed somebody!"

"Instead, you can tell them how your quick thinking got us one of S.T.I.N.G.'s founding members." Julie-Su said with a proud smile.

Sadie beamed, pleased with herself that she had managed to pull this off. This was more than making up for how she'd treated Relic

earlier! But there was no time to celebrate for the battle wasn't over yet. Abyss charged in, spinning like a top with her twin tentacles cleaving through the air like a pair of whips. She hit Sadie, Julie-Su and Remington, knocking them all down like they were pins at a bowling alley. They weren't down for long as they picked themselves up again and braced themselves for a fight as Abyss stopped spinning and glowered at them.

"Wasn't expecting you to take Breakdown out so quickly." she grumbled, "I guess you saps are tougher than I thought."

"Why do you think we're called the KNUCKLES Clan?" Sadie retorted.

"If only your precious daddy was here now. I'd love to see him watch as I beat you to a pulp!" Abyss growled.

"That maybe how it went last time, salt breath, but this time around, I'm gonna kick YOUR ass!" Sadie snarled, baring her fists.

She and Abyss charged to each other, rage driving them on as they prepared to have a long overdue rematch. Ten years had passed since their last bout, and now they were going to see if a decade's worth of time passing would yield a different outcome...

Meanwhile, Knuckles, Shade, Relic and Dimitri had found the very place that the two guardians had been able to sense what they thought might be the Chaos Gauntlet. They had approached a cave that had evidently been sealed for quite some time as there was a colossal pile of rocks blocking the entrance. To any passerby, it would just look like a rocky hillside, but it was in fact a cave. Where the rock pile had come from, nobody knew but Knuckles imagine the ancients would've managed it somehow. The four explorers observed the blocked up entrance.

"The signature's even stronger here." Knuckles announced, "It must be in that cave."

"But look at that pile of rocks!" Relic exclaimed, "We'd never be able to move them out of the way and get inside! We'd need a lot of heavy machinery to move all that!"

Knuckles just laughed in response.

"Lady, one thing you must know about me...no rock can EVER stand in my way!" he gloated, cracking his namesakes, "Stand back! This could get messy!"

Shade quickly urged Relic and Dimitri away and behind the cover of a nearby tree, as her husband drew back his fists, and began wailing on the boulders blocking the entrance. Soon, rock fragments were flying through the air, as Knuckles carved his way into the debris. More than once, the boulders threatened to collapse on top of him, but Knuckles simply punched through rocks or tossed them away like they were soccer balls. Within minutes, Knuckles found an opening in the rock face, and felt hot, musty air hit his face.

"I've found it!" he called to the others, "Let me just widen the hole."

After a few more punches, the hole was wide enough for Knuckles and the others to climb into, and he motioned for Shade, Relic and Dimitri to follow as he went his way into the cave. As they entered, Relic turned to Shade, her face flush with admiration.

"By Jove. I had no idea your husband was so strong..." she whispered.

"They don't call him "Knuckles" for nothing." Shade replied, chuckling.

The cave was dark, the air still warm and musty, due to centuries of being trapped inside. That was comforting to them as they'd expected it to be cold in the cave.

"Anyone got a torch?" Shade asked.

"I do." Relic said, pulling out a torch from her backpack and lighting it up.

"Very good." Dimitri said, "Now, I suggest we proceed with caution; the ancients may have left booby traps, on the off-chance someone got in."

"I just hope they were too arrogant to think they'd need any and didn't set any up at all." Shade muttered.

"Don't worry too much about it, I've had plenty of experience dealing with booby traps on my expeditions." Relic said reassuringly, "I've learnt all about how to avoid them and how to survive if you set one off."

"Then maybe that information will come in handy." Knuckles said, though he himself was confident that any booby trap would be useless against him and his wife and that there was nothing to worry about.

The four Mobians ventured inside with Relic in the lead as she had the torch. The bright beam stretched far ahead, allowing them to see plenty of the cave ahead despite the darkness. The cave seemed to stretch down for miles, suggesting it was really deep. Why wouldn't it? The ancients would've wanted to make sure the Chaos Gauntlet was hard to get to. Trouble was, how deep did it go? There was no way of telling so all they could do was venture downwards and find out.

"I think we've got quite a way down." Knuckles murmured, "We could be down here for longer than we thought guys."

"Well, just so long as it pays off in the end, I'm not complaining." Dimitri replied.

"Nor am I." Relic agreed.

They trooped down for a little way further, when Relic's foot suddenly stepped on something that sank beneath it. Her experience of exploring various locations told her it was bad.

"Hold it!" she said, throwing out a arm to halt the others.

Whatever it was she's stepped on, she knew that it would activate something. A panel in the floor was the most basic way to activate a trap. But what would happen? They quickly found out due to the tell-tale sign of dust sprinkling down from the ceiling. They looked up...and screamed as a huge boulder tumbled down towards them, threatening to squash them all once it reached the bottom. It had somehow been suspended above a long tunnel in the ceiling and held in place until Relic had activated it. Everybody jumped back to avoid being crushed, the huge boulder coming down with a heavy crash that made the ground shudder beneath their feet. Then due to the sloped nature of the tunnel, it rolled away like a marble in a marble run. Knuckles and Shade quickly ran after it.

"We've gotta stop that thing before it hits the end of the tunnel!" Knuckles cried, "If the Chaos Gauntlet's down there, it could smash it to bits!"

"I know what to do!" Shade yelled back.

She drew out her twin blades and swiped the air, sending pink energy waves towards the boulder. The two waves hit it, breaking it apart and reducing it to huge chunks of rubble that could no longer roll. To make doubly sure that it could be a danger no more, Knuckles ran up to the huge remains of the boulder and smashed them to pieces with his fists. That was one trap done, and hopefully it would be the only one. Relic and Dimitri caught up to the guardians, sharing impressed gazes.

"Bravo! Exemplary teamwork there guardians!" Relic praised.

"It is quite clear to me why you two are the current guardians with how well you work together." Dimitri complimented.

"I like to think me and Shade go together like two peas in a pod." Knuckles replied, casually.

Shade smiled, flattered by the remark.

"I'm so terribly sorry I activated that trap." Relic put in, "Experience should've taught me to be more careful."

"Don't sweat it. You recognized the danger quicker than any of us so we could react in time." Knuckles noted, "Thanks to you, we didn't get flattened."

"Well if you put it that way, I suppose..." Relic thought.

"Let's pat ourselves on the back later, although I no longer have a back." Dimitri said impatiently, "We still need to get that gauntlet. The sooner we find it, the quicker we can leave."

The four explorers continued their trek down the slope that would hopefully lead them to where the ancient relic was. The incident with the boulder had made everybody weary so they took their steps carefully so as not to activate anymore traps. Luckily, it seemed the ancients were so confident in their trap that they'd only built one for they came across no other traps. It made Knuckles shudder to think if anybody had ever been crushed by that boulder and how many may have accidentally activated it when venturing down here.

They climbed down for many minutes until finally, they reached the bottom and found themselves passing through an archway that led to a surprising sight. Relic shone her torch ahead and gasped. None of them had expected to come across a huge body of water in a cave. It was as if somebody had picked up an entire lake and somehow dragged it all the way down into this cave and dumped it there. It was possible to find water in caves, but very unlikely. Maybe this cave had a tunnel that led out into the ocean somewhere. Now they understand why the ancients had been so light on security. The one trap was all they'd need if their treasure was hiding at the bottom of a huge pool of water! It would be impossible to get the relic if they

didn't have a way of reaching it and looking at the water, they imagined it was probably very deep. They couldn't even see anything that would imply the Chaos Gauntlet was in there. They'd expected it to be shining given it was made of Chaos Emeralds but all they could see was black, like they were looking at a lake of ink.

"Well that's just prime." Dimitri sighed, "If you're lucky enough to survive the giant boulder, you get to go for a swim in pitch darkness! How can we even be sure the damn gauntlet's even at the bottom of this thing?!"

"It's there alright." Knuckles retorted, "I can sense that signature again. It's the strongest it's ever been."

"But how can we POSSIBLY find it?" Relic exclaimed, "It's too dark to see anything and we have NO idea how deep the water is! We'd risk drowning ourselves just trying to reach it!"

"The ancients couldn't have buried this thing in a more perfect place." Knuckles muttered, agreeing with Relic, "If we had scuba equipment, we'd have a chance. But no such luck. We've GOT to find another way around this!"

"I could probably find it...if I was actually waterproof." Dimitri sighed, "My bubble could maybe keep the water out, but it'd probably trickle through the holes for my tentacles. It's hopeless. This whole expedition has been a waste of time!"

"No. No it hasn't." Shade insisted, "Because I'M going in."

Knuckles grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Are you crazy?! You'll never find it!" he cried, "I'm not letting you go in there and drown yourself Shade!"

"Yes you will because I won't drown in there." Shade retorted, slapping her husband's hands away, "My helmet will keep the water

out and my blades can provide the light I need to see where I'm going."

"Your helmet won't stop you from needing air madame." Relic noted, "Even if you had an air tank with you, you'd still need to come up to breathe again."

"I'm sure my helmet will give me enough air for me to find the gauntlet. If I start running out, I'll emerge immediately." Shade insisted, "Now enough talk, I'm going in!"

"Wait!" Knuckles cried, grabbing Shade's arm.

Shade was about to snap at him but she saw that Knuckles wasn't trying to stop her from going. His face was full of concern, but he had only stopped her just to say something. He clearly knew he wasn't going to change her mind.

"Be careful love." he said softly.

"I'll come back to you Knuckles." Shade said reassuringly, kissing him goodbye for the time being.

She then deployed her helmet, drew out her blades and dived straight into the water. Knuckles watched as she disappeared into the black, watery void, his nerves tingling as he waited for her to emerge again. He hoped she wouldn't take too long. Relic and Dimitri shared his concern.

"Your wife is so brave...I really hope she makes it, Knuckles." Relic said nervously.

"Yes, so do I!" Dimitri said, his voice suddenly dangerous and intimidating. Before Relic could do anything, she was zapped from behind. Dimitri had raised his tentacles and seized Relic by the back, the three-pronged claws providing the electrical shocks. She screamed in pain and then collapsed, unconscious.

"Dimitri, what are you-?!" Knuckles began in bewilderment, but before he could raise his fists in defence, Dimitri got him too. He collapsed heavily on the ground, lying beside Relic.

"So sorry, dear guardian." Dimitri said, though his tone suggested he wasn't sorry, "But I have my own reasons for acquiring the Gauntlet."

He looked back to the water with his optics observing for any signs that Shade would be returning to the surface. Of course, the dark was no problem for a cyborg like himself so he could see just fine. He stayed still, patiently waiting to strike at Shade when she returned...

Unaware of what was happening above the surface, Shade swam down as deep as she could go, keeping her eyes open for the gauntlet. With her blades in hand providing a light source and making handy fins for her, she was swimming quite quickly. The female guardian had already been swimming quite far and yet no matter how many times she swiped her arms to propel herself down, she didn't seem to be getting any closer to the bottom. How deep did this thing go?! No wonder this relic had lain dormant for so long, nobody would be able to reach it back in those days! Shade was beginning to doubt if her plan was a good idea at all and if she may have been better off going back to the village to get actual scuba equipment. But she didn't want to give up, not when she could stay underwater for a good few minutes. To preserve air for herself, she didn't talk at all so she could focus on her swimming. If it looked like it was too deep to carry on going, she would turn around and get back to the surface.

But it seemed luck was on Shade's side for just below her, she could see a small light at the bottom of the pool. Could that be the Chaos Gauntlet? If she could see a light, then hopefully that meant she was close to the bottom. She headed towards it, kicking furiously for extra speed. She finally reached the light, and saw why it was so faint. The light was peeking through a tiny crack in what looked like an armoured casing that was clearly meant to contain the relic inside. Once again, the ancients had made sure it wasn't easy to just walk

in and get this gauntlet. Shade couldn't even see any evidence that the casing opened at all, no hinges, no padlock keeping it shut or anything. Had they simply put the gauntlet in there and welded it shut somehow? She could see an uneven line that wrapped all around the casing, suggesting that it had been two halves sealed together to permanently enclose the relic for good. Shade wouldn't be able to carry it like that as it was too heavy to move and was chained to the floor.

The ancients thought of every possible way to keep people from just taking the gauntlet. Shade thought to herself, Well planned on their behalf. But they didn't count on someone like me with more advanced weaponry to be able to crack this thing open...

She smirked to herself as she held up her blades, which were still glowing. Judging their position carefully, Shade plunged both blades into the weld line of the casing, pushing them in as far as she could. Then, twisting both blades, Shade began to prise the casing open. It was hard work; despite countless centuries underwater, the metal was still very tough, and for a moment, Shade thought her blades would snap. Then, the casing finally broke open and the light seemed to engulf Shade.

"Whoa!" she said aloud, shielding her eyes.

As the light finally dimmed, Shade looked down and gazed in wonder at the gauntlet. It was twice as large as the average Mobian hand, no doubt to better hold the Chaos Emeralds. It was emerald green, the same colour as the Master Emerald, and there were seven holes in it, five on the knuckles, and two on the forearm section; one for each Emerald. Despite having been buried here for countless years, the gauntlet still looked new, completely unaffected by its underwater resting place. Shade ran a hand over it with admiration.

"It's...amazing." she whispered, "How did the ancients create something like this out of mere Chaos Emeralds?"

It was a silly question to ask as there was no way she'd ever find the answer to it. Shade reached out and grabbed the gauntlet. She lifted it up, not surprised that it felt a little heavy. She imagined it must take a strong Mobian to be able to wear it and use it. Good thing her husband was just the type to use it. Shade quickly swam up to the surface, clutching the gauntlet tightly as she kicked furiously to propel herself up. She could feel herself struggling for breath for the air supply her helmet had managed to contain was running out. Would she make it in time? Shade didn't dare think about the worst, she only thought about reaching the surface. It was so dark, how could she even see if she was close to the surface?!

And then...she felt the water fold back over her head and shoulders. Shade looked around, retracting her helmet. She could feel the cool air of the cave on her face, no water whatsoever. She'd made it! The guardian allowed herself a couple of seconds to regain her breath before heading to the edge so she could climb out of the water. It occurred to her that something wasn't right. It was pitch black. Why wasn't Relic shining her torch so she could see? Where was she, Knuckles and Dimitri? Thankfully, she had the Chaos Gauntlet so she had a light source with her. She held it ahead of herself, only for Dimitri to snatch it out of her hands. The cyborg echidna head stared at it with his optics aglow. As far as he was concerned, he'd just found the Holy Grail.

"At last...the Chaos Gauntlet! You've found it dear guardian! And it's more beautiful than I could ever have imagined..." Dimitri whispered.

"I was worried I wouldn't make it, but I did." Shade said, pulling herself out of the water, "Where's Knuckles and Relic? I thought they were waiting for me."

"I'm afraid they decided to take a nap." Dimitri replied darkly, "And now, you're going to have one too..."

Before Shade could say anything, Dimitri lashed out with another tentacle and planted it squarely in the middle of her chest.

"Dimitri, what are you..."

She got no further as she was swiftly electrocuted into unconsciousness. She collapsed on the floor and lay still. It was a mercy for her that Dimitri had decided not to do that while she was still in the water. Now the guardians were unconscious, Dimitri could flee with the prize and inform Abyss on his progress. He imagined she'd take all the credit when they reported to S.T.I.N.G. but not that he minded. He had his own agendas.

"It'll be a shame to destroy this...but anything's better than letting these children who call themselves "guardians" and those Eggman worshipping monsters have the powers of a god at their side..." he muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, Sadie was fighting Abyss, applying all of her training to get back at the cephalopod for attacking her as a five-year-old.

Abyss whipped her tentacles round to swipe at Sadie, but she grabbed them both.

"Not this time!" she said and swung Abyss around, before letting go, causing Abyss to spin away, bouncing like a stone skimming on water, before coming to a stop.

"Ugh, looks like you've been catching on from last time we met." Abyss muttered, picking herself up, "That's both annoying and reassuring. Annoying in how you're gonna be tougher to beat, but reassuring in the sense this fight won't be boring!"

"Oh this fight's gonna be far from boring!" Sadie sneered, "It'll be humiliating for you when this is over!"

She ran towards Abyss, her fists clenched and aching for a punch. The squid smirked, seeing her opponent had made the big mistake of charging straight at her. She lashed out with her tentacles, intending to swipe her from the side and send her hurling away. But

the pirate had been tricked. Sadie had baited her into making that move, throwing herself down on the ground to avoid being hit by the tentacles. She continued to slide towards Abyss before leaping back up onto her feet and clasping both fists together. She swung them both into Abyss's face, her hands like a wrecking ball slamming into a wall. Abyss was so taken aback by the punch that she didn't even feel herself hit the ground as she fell over. She clutched her cheek in pain, grimacing from the blow. It baffled her to think how Sadie had gotten so strong in ten years. She must've had some good training!

The squid didn't get time to get up as Sadie pounced on her angrily and whaled on her heavily, throwing every punch like she was hitting Abyss with a sack of rocks. The marine Mobian couldn't fight back or defend herself as Sadie kept throwing punches. She was punching her so hard that Abyss was spitting blood out as she was hit.

"This is for stealing my necklace!" Sadie screamed.

POW!

"This is for what you did to me ten years ago!"

PUNCH!

"And this is for joining S.T.I.N.G.!"

She threw one last punch, making Abyss cry out and spit blood again. Her face was badly bruised and messed up by the punches. Sadie was about to punch her again, but as she caught a glimpse of Abyss's bruised face, she found herself back where she was ten years ago, attacked by the squid and reduced to a bruised and bloody mess left to cry about what had happened while her bully got away scot-free. It seemed a fitting irony in a sense that now she was the one standing victorious while Abyss was the one badly beaten. Her opponent glared at her, though she was having trouble doing so for her eyes could barely even open.

"What...are you waiting for...brat?" she spluttered, "Go ahead. Finish it...you know you want to!"

Sadie was seriously tempted to, but then, she wondered; had she sunk to Abyss' level in doing this? Her parents had always told her to fight with honour and never resort to ruthlessness or killing unless absolutely necessary. Abyss was beaten now; she had in a way answered for what she had done to Sadie. Now Sadie should do the honourable thing and spare her; take her prisoner. Who knew what she could reveal about S.T.I.N.G.?

"No." Sadie said firmly, "I'm not like you, Abyss. I don't beat my enemies when they're down; nor do I kill. No, you're under arrest."

"Should've... known." Abyss choked, "You're too... weak to finish me."

"No, I'd be weak if I gave in to killing." Sadie replied.

Abyss suddenly grinned, though it looked very painful.

"Sucker!" she said, as Sadie was suddenly hit with a powerful surge of electricity. Sting had snuck up behind her and zapped her with his tentacles. Sadie swayed, and then collapsed, conscious but too weak to fight.

"Are you alright, captain?" Sting asked as he helped Abyss back onto her feet.

"I'll live." Abyss muttered, trying to ignore the pain in her face, "Your sneak attack was perfectly executed Sting. I might have to promote you for this."

The jellyfish beamed, liking the sound of that. It was about time he was better appreciated for his part in the crew. But before he or Abyss could do anything, a laser shot came out of nowhere and almost hit them. Sting pushed Abyss out the way to avoid the shot. It was Julie-Su once again with her pistol in hand and looking very

ticked off. Sadie lay on the ground, still unable to get up again, but she at least managed to smile at the sight of her auntie-figure getting in on the action.

"You leave the guardian's daughter alone you Eggman-worshipping freaks!" the pink echidna yelled angrily.

"Hey, I resent the freak thing." Sting said, drawing his own flintlock, taking aim and firing.

His aim caused Julie-Su to stop in her tracks and take cover to avoid being shot. It was just her luck that Abyss had a first-mate with a really good aim. While Julie-Su was being kept at bay by Sting, Abyss seized her moment to escape with a prisoner. Ignoring the pain in her face, she wrapped her tentacles around the weakened Sadie and hoisted her off the ground. Sadie tried to cry for help but Abyss had wrapped a tentacle around her mouth to keep her from screaming. The echidna struggled but couldn't break free from her captor's grip.

"And look at that, I win again." Abyss crowed, "Ten years hasn't made a bit of difference for you pretty guardian."

She was then stopped by a sudden beeping sound that made her fish out her communications device. Hopefully that meant good news. The squid answered it.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Abyss, it's Dimitri. I have subdued the guardians and obtained the Chaos Gauntlet." came the voice of her comrade, "I've used it to locate the Chaos Emeralds. Meet me at my coordinates to get them."

Sadie cried out a muffled yelp of surprise from behind Abyss's tentacle. She couldn't believe her ears! Dimitri was working with Abyss?! What had he done to her parents?

"Dimitri...you amaze me." Abyss purred, "I initially doubted you but I guess I was wrong to do so. I can see why S.T.I.N.G. let you in."

"I assume that's meant to be a compliment, though I don't see it as such..." Dimitri muttered.

"Whatever, just stay where you are so we can get those emeralds." Abyss ordered, "We'll come to you right away."

She shut off and called out to her crew.

"Mateys! Take whatever prisoners you can and return to the ship! We're leaving!" she barked.

The crew members began gathering up unconscious echidnas, all the while evading fire from the remaining tribe members. A few hurried over to Breakdown, who was still too weak to move due to his double dose of bullets. They grabbed him and tried to haul him away, but he was too heavy.

"Come on!" yelled another jellyfish crew member named Opal, "Move yourself, you big oaf!"

Breakdown growled in resentment, but he still couldn't move very far and the other echidnas were closing in fast. Opal tried to jolt him with her tentacles, but it did very little.

"We have no choice!" yelled Striker, a mantis shrimp, "We have to go! We'll come back for him later!"

With that, he, Opal and the others made a break for it after the others. The tribe continued to fire at them, but within moments, they had disappeared into the jungle.

"We have to follow them!" Julie-Su said, "They've taken the Guardians' daughter and several of our tribesmen!"

"Agreed." Remington said, "But we also need to find out where the Guardians themselves are. And we need to secure Breakdown. He

could be an asset to us."

"They went looking for some artefact called the "Chaos Gauntlet"." Julie-Su murmured, "They could be anywhere looking for that. You go look for them Remington, I'm sure you'll find them."

"Copy that, Julie." Remington said, with a firm nod, "I'll radio as I find them. Any idea which way they went?"

Julie-Su pointed in the direction she remembered Knuckles, Shade, Dimitri and Relic had gone earlier. Without another word, Remington hurried off into the jungles. Julie-Su turned to the fallen Breakdown.

"Get something to hold him." she said, "And take him to the lab; we could download info from his brain, since he can't talk."

"Yes ma'am." said one of the echidnas that hadn't been captured by the pirates.

He and several others gathered around the roboticized barracuda and carried him away, straining to do so for he was quite heavy. Julie-Su decided to help out just to provide another pair of hands to help carry Breakdown away. Abyss thought she was so superior by capturing several tribesmen and Sadie herself, but she'd neglected to make sure they didn't have a prisoner too! Julie could already see this being the squid's downfall for whatever Breakdown had in his head was surely going to be useful. They would rescue those captured echidnas in no time at all...

Abyss has Sadie and Dimitri's got the Chaos Gauntlet! Looks like things are going badly, but is it over for our heroes? Not by a long shot. They'll spring back from this and fight back! But will they succeed? Tune in next time as we journey to the Isle of Abyss...

Valuable Relics Chapter 5

15 Years Later: Chapter 3: Valuable Relics

Chapter 5: The Isle of Abyss

"Uuuuuggggggggghhhhhhhhhhh...why does waking up after being unconscious have to hurt so much?" Knuckles grunted, slowly raising up from the cave floor and massaging his cranium.

It had been a while since he, Relic and Shade had been knocked out by Dimitri and they were just starting to come to. At first, Knuckles thought he might still be unconscious because as he opened his eyes, it was still pitch black everywhere. Down where they had found the Chaos Gauntlet, it was total darkness and Knuckles couldn't even see his own hands as he looked down at them. But any doubts on being awake were dispelled as a torchlight shone over him. He quickly turned his head to see who was shining it at him. To his relief, it was only Relic, the pika having come to just seconds before the guardian. She counted her blessings that the torch was still working so they could see down in this deep cave.

"Thanks Relic. I was worried for a minute!" Knuckles exclaimed.

"I thought I was either dead or still knocked out too." Relic murmured, "At least I still have my torch. There doesn't seem to be any sign of Dimitri though."

She shone the torch all around the cave, the beam sweeping slowly over the scenery as the archaeologist observed closely. Knuckles followed the torch's light, noticing that Relic wasn't wrong about what she'd said. The robot echidna-head seemed to have vanished. The guardian narrowed his eyes in anger.

"I don't get it. Why did he just knock us out like that and then leave?" he wondered, "He could've killed us then and there if he wanted us

dead! But why would he want that? We helped him out after S.T.I.N.G. shot him!"

"Unless the whole thing was a trick and he's actually working for them." came a familiar voice that made Knuckles and Relic turn around.

Relic shone the torch on the person who had said that, sighing with relief to see it was Shade. She had come to at last and had managed to blink the sleep out of her eyes. The torch's light was welcome to her as it showed she wasn't asleep anymore.

"After I got the Chaos Gauntlet from the water, he snatched it out of my hands and then shocked me into unconsciousness." Shade explained, "Given the only light source is Relic's torch, I imagine he's fled with the Chaos Gauntlet in tow."

"So do you think that Dimitri was only pretending to be on our side the whole time just so he could get the gauntlet?" Relic asked.

"I think that's exactly it." Shade muttered, "I bet the whole scene in the forest was a set-up so we wouldn't suspect his true nature. I wouldn't be surprised if rather than being pursued by S.T.I.N.G., he's actually working with them!"

"To think we accused Relic of being a spy." Knuckles sighed in annoyance, "It was Dimitri we should've been suspicious of all along! I just hope if he is on their side, he didn't bug us while we were unconscious..."

"Bugged?" Relic asked curiously.

"One of S.T.I.N.G.'s agents did it to our friend, Tails, back when the double weddings were taking place." Shade explained, "Luckily, we got it out of him and he's studying it to see what he can find out about it. We'll have to see if Dimitri's done it to us while we were knocked out."

"Oh good gracious!" Relic yelped, nearly dropping the torch in alarm. She ran a hand over her stomach as if afraid something was going to pop out of it.

"Easy there, don't drop our only source of light!" Knuckles exclaimed, "We'll worry about that later, we've gotta get out of this cave and back to the village to warn everybody that Dimitri's a double-agent!"

"If I get my hands on him, I'll reduce him to less than what he already is!" Shade growled, clenching her fists in rage.

"We'll make sure there won't be enough left for spare parts!" Knuckles agreed, "Come on, let's go."

The trio began to run back up the sloping passageway that had led down to the lake where the Gauntlet had been. Knuckles and Shade had little trouble, given how strong their legs were, but Relic came stopping to catch her breath.

"Sorry." she panted, after the third stop, "I'm not in good a shape as you two. I gotta get out of the lab more often."

At last, they reached the opening to the cave and staggered into the open air. The bright sun was dazzling after the darkness of the cave with only the torch or gauntlet to break it.

"Phew, I'm glad to be out of there." Relic said.

"Me too." Shade said.

"Guardians? Where are you?" came a voice from not too far away. It surprised the echidnas to be hearing a voice so soon after exiting the cave, let alone one that was pretty close by. It seemed luck was on their side.

"Remington?" Knuckles said, recognising it at once, "Over here, towards the cliff!" he called out so Remington could hear him.

It seemed to have worked for a moment later, Remington burst from the bushes, out of breath, but looking relieved.

"Oh, thank Chaos you're alright." he panted.

"Remington, what's happened?"

The soldier quickly filled the two guardians in on what had happened back at the village from Abyss's attack to their defeating Breakdown the Barracuda and the kidnapping of several tribesmen, including Sadie. Shade put her hands over her mouth in horror as Remington relayed all this.

"My baby!" she shrieked, "S.T.I.N.G. has got her!"

"Good gracious, the poor dear!" Relic cried, sharing Shade's horror. It seemed weird for her to be concerned over the one who had initially accused her of being a spy but that didn't matter. The pika couldn't help but feel afraid for Sadie just as much as Knuckles and Shade were.

"First Dimitri steals the gauntlet, now Abyss kidnaps our daughter!" Knuckles growled, his fists quivering with fury, "We've gotta find them and get her back before they do anything to her!"

"But how will we find them?" Remington exclaimed, "We have no idea where Abyss even lives! She and her pirates could be anywhere by now!"

"I beg your pardon sir, but did you say "pirates"?" Relic inquired.

"Why yes, why do you ask?" Remington replied.

"Your mentioning of pirates and some squid named "Abyss" is ringing a few bells." the archaeologist answered, "I believe that there is a place out there known as the "Isle of Abyss". Rumour has it that it's some sort of island that used to be owned by the ancient echidnas but pirates have since taken it over and made it their own.

Given it's now called the Isle of Abyss, it stands to reason that that is where she and her crew probably live."

"Do you know the way?" Knuckles asked frantically.

"I should hope I did!" Relic retorted, "I was planning to study that island myself when I'd finished observing Downunda. No doubt that island is full of history to explore. I guess now we have more a reason than ever to go there."

"Exactly!" Knuckles cried, "We'll get to this Isle of Abyss and get back my daughter and the other villagers they've kidnapped!"

He punched his fists together to emphasize the point that he was going to break a few faces or two to achieve this goal.

"Wait a minute." Shade put in, "What about the Chaos and Master Emeralds? I just realized that if S.T.I.N.G. are here, they might be looking for them too!"

"And they've got the Chaos Gauntlet..." Knuckles muttered, "Dimitri might even be using it to locate the emeralds now as we speak! Shade, you and Remington get to the shrine as fast as you can! Me and Relic will find the Isle of Abyss!"

"Might I suggest you two go and meet Julie-Su back at the village first?" Remington put in, "She and the others have subdued Breakdown so maybe we can get some information out of him, get an idea on what we're up against and maybe learn something about the island beforehand."

"Good idea." the guardian said with a smile, "Me and Relic will go there first. Call us once you two get to the shrine and inform us on what's happening!"

"Got it. See you later my love." Shade said, turning on her heels and rushing off towards the Emerald Shrine with Remington close behind.

"Come on, Relic, let's get back to the village!" Knuckles said.

"Right behind you!" Relic said, as she and Knuckles set off back to the village.

Meanwhile, back in the village, Breakdown had been hauled to the laboratory, and after securing his limbs with strong bonds, the echidna tech experts had pried open his head to hook up his robotic brain to their computer. This had to be done very carefully, as they didn't want to accidentally kill the barracuda, even he was an enemy. Julie-Su has her pistol pointed at Breakdown's head.

"Just twitch, and you'll get a third helping of bullets." she said threateningly.

Breakdown knew it was pointless to resist. He'd rather live to fight another day and be able to get revenge on these heathens for doing this to him. He stayed still and didn't budge as the echidnas got to work on him. Julie-Su remained where she was, coiled up like a spring and waiting for the slightest excuse to shoot. It felt strange to her that she should be this close to an actual S.T.I.N.G. member, let alone one of the founding members. It just made his capture all the more worthwhile as it meant they had their hands on one of the organization's most important members. The pink echidna even wondered if one day, the tribe would capture the organization's leader. It made her smile with pleasure at such a thought.

Julie-Su was snapped out of her thoughts as somebody ran into the laboratory. She turned around and her face lit up with glee to see none other than Knuckles the Echidna, back at last. She ran over to him and hugged him in welcome. She also noticed that Relic was with him but Shade and Remington weren't here too. Dimitri wasn't here as well, which made her even more curious.

"Guardian! Thank Chaos you're back!" she cried, "I knew Remington would find you. Where is he? And where's your wife and Dimitri?"

Knuckles quickly filled her in on what had happened with him, Shade and Relic and how the Chaos Gauntlet had been lost to the double-agent. Julie-Su stomped the floor hard with one of her feet in exasperation.

"That dirty, stinking liar!" she snarled, "He was with THEM the whole time?! How could he deceive us like that?!"

"Either S.T.I.N.G. forced him into it or he's a willing part of the group." Knuckles murmured, shaking his head disapprovingly, "Either way, Shade and Remington are hunting him down as we speak so they can get the Gauntlet back and hopefully stop Abyss and her gang from getting the emeralds. Speaking of her, Remington told me she and her team had managed to kidnap several tribesmen and my daughter!"

"I'm afraid so." Julie-Su confirmed, "We couldn't save them before they fled, hence why I sent Remington to find you. We were planning a rescue mission once we'd finished with Breakdown here," she motioned to the restrained robo-barracuda on the bench behind her, "And now you're back, you can join us for that!"

Knuckles took a moment to look over at Breakdown and allow himself the pleasure of seeing a S.T.I.N.G. agent in their custody. It had been a while since they'd captured any S.T.I.N.G. members. The last time they'd arrested any of them was Ramirez the Chameleon, whom was now currently locked away in a secret facility that Sora Prower knew from her time in the M.S.I.U. As they spoke, Ramirez was all locked up and alone in a place where nobody would find him, and hopefully suffering for his crimes against Mobius and its people. When this was over, Knuckles would happily throw Breakdown, Abyss and her entire crew in that cell with him. He strode over to Breakdown, a smug smile on his face.

"Heh, heh, not so tough now when you're not able to move, are ya?" he crowed, "How does it feel to have been defeated by Eggman's rebels once again?"

Breakdown just narrowed his optics but said nothing. He didn't even bother growling at him, knowing it wouldn't achieve much.

"It was thanks to your daughter we even subdued him." Julie-Su informed, "It was her idea for us to shoot him in the mouth and bring him down, reckoning that was his weak point."

"Shade always believed Sadie was smarter than she let on..." Knuckles mused with pride. It did him good to see that his wife had been right about Sadie all along and that she had more to her than just being strong like him.

"So now we have this monster tied down, we can hopefully pry any useful information out of his head." Relic said, observing Breakdown with something close to fascination in her eyes, "Maybe he'll even have a map of Abyss's hideout that we could use to navigate our way around."

"Wait, you know where Abyss is hiding?" Julie-Su asked, arching an eyebrow in surprise.

"I've heard of a place called the "Isle of Abyss"." Relic explained, "Many people say that it's an island that's been taken over by pirates and given Abyss herself is one, I see no reason why we wouldn't look for her there."

"I dunno, don't you think that's a bit too obvious a place to hide?" one of the scientists put in, looking up briefly from his work, "You'd think Abyss would be more subtle than that."

"I wouldn't have said subtlety was her strong point to begin with." Julie-Su snorted, "I mean she dresses in an outfit that was clearly inspired by how Eggman looked when he was alive, that makes her stand out a bit. Plus she's clearly got an ego so naming an island after herself would be just the thing she'd do."

"Hence why that's the first place we're going to look for her." Knuckles declared, "Have you guys got anything out of Breakdown

yet?" he asked, glancing over at the scientists.

"We're doing our best." one of them replied, "But the brain of a Robian is difficult to slice into, without causing any harm, of course."

"Hang on, I think I have something!" another said excitedly.

"Yes?" Knuckles said eagerly.

The scientist paused as he consulted the data he was receiving.

"It's too vague to be certain, but it might be the layout of Abyss' HQ and the identities of her co-horts."

"You look into this Julie-Su. You're better with computers than I am." Knuckles offered.

To a computer genius, the data would be like reading another language and to Knuckles, it just looked like garbled text on the screen that he'd never decipher. Relic had no idea what it was either, sharing Knuckles's lack of skill in technology and computers. She was used to reading ancient languages in caves and tombs, not text on a screen. The both watched as Julie-Su leaned over the screen the scientists were looking at and absorbed the information it was displaying. Her observant eyes darted up and down constantly as the data scrolled by. She shook her head.

"I can't really tell right now. But we should uncover it if we dig a little deeper." the pink echidna announced.

She plugged her robotic dreadlock into the side of the computer to provide her own set of hacking skills to see if she could bypass Breakdown's mental defences and get inside. Despite not wanting to talk about it, she did find herself occasionally thankful that she had this metal appendage in place of an ordinary dreadlock. It certainly was helping her and the scientists out now. Knuckles and Relic watched, not daring to make a single noise as the pink echidna worked away. It took a few minutes, but it seemed as if she'd made

some kind of progress. Julie-Su straightened up, her dreadlock unplugging from the computer, and she looked very excited as if she'd found the Holy Grail in Breakdown's mind.

"Yes! I got through!" she cried, "Have a look at this!"

Knuckles and Relic did so, peering over at the screen as it was showing coherent text to read and some images that looked like a map of some kind. Said map was in the shape of an island. The Isle of Abyss? Relic seemed to recognize it for she peered even closer at the image, adjusting her glasses to make sure she was seeing correctly.

"That's the island." she confirmed, "It matches images I've seen in atlases and on model globes. We now have a good insight into Abyss's hideout."

"And what about all the other stuff we got?" Knuckles asked, "All that text for example?"

"We haven't got time to read it now. We have our men and women to rescue." Julie-Su muttered, "But I'll bet it's important. We'll save the data and study it later. For now, we should focus on this map of the Isle of Abyss we have."

"We could find a way to sneak in and rescue those poor echidnas." Relic chimed in, "But what do we do about Breakdown? Do we keep him here?"

"I'm tempted to say yes, but at the same time, we could potentially use him to our advantage." Knuckles deduced, "Maybe we could tempt Abyss to negotiate a prisoner exchange. Breakdown's freedom for Sadie's, if you know what I mean."

"It's not like giving him back will do S.T.I.N.G. any good now we have some interesting information we've plucked out of his head." Julie-Su sneered, "But it's risky. What if she refuses?"

"Then we'll just have to settle for more aggressive means." Knuckles said, "But it should be a surprise; something she won't expect. Relic, Julie-Su, how about you two sneak in and hack the security system? If Abyss refuses, shut down the power; if she accepts, do so anyway. It'll get the others out more easily. What do you think?"

The two girls looked over at each other as if trying read one another's thoughts. They weren't telepathic, but they both felt as if they'd come to the same conclusion. They turned back to face Knuckles.

"I'm not really the kind of person to get into these situations, but I'll do it for you guardian." Relic declared, "At the very least, I owe you that much for setting me free and believing I wasn't a spy."

"And you know me too well Knuckles. My life is to this tribe and I won't rest until all our men and women are freed from S.T.I.N.G.!" Julie-Su cried, pounding her palm with her fist.

"Just what I wanted to hear." Knuckles said proudly, "We'll get Shade and Remington to join up with us once they're done at the Emerald Shrine."

"We should go there now and see if they need help!" Relic exclaimed, "We have no idea what's going on over there!"

Knuckles agreed with the pika. He trusted his wife to be able to handle herself, but not even she would have the strength to take down an entire pirate crew should they get to the emeralds. He and Julie-Su freed Breakdown from his restraints and carried him out of the lab with Relic following close behind. It was going to be hard work dragging the immobile Robian with them to the Emerald Shrine but if they were going to try a prisoner exchange, they had to take him. Would Abyss let the echidnas go for Breakdown's return to S.T.I.N.G.? Knuckles knew that very soon, he was going to find out. He just prayed with all his might that they weren't too late to stop Dimitri and Abyss from stealing the emeralds...

"There they are...the Chaos and Master Emeralds! At last...I thought I'd never live to see such a valuable piece of echidna history in person." Dimitri crooned with admiration.

There they were, sitting on a plinth in a circle around another plinth in the centre, the Chaos and Master Emeralds themselves. The robotic head had found the shrine with help from the Chaos Gauntlet and he approached the emeralds with a mixture of excitement and awe on his face. Dimitri was puzzled to see that there was an eighth emerald sitting among the famous seven emeralds, but he didn't mind. He was sure there was a reason why it was here. His optics were fixated on the dazzling, beautiful gems sitting proudly on their plinths like powerful rulers looking over their kingdoms. It was a sight that Dimitri wanted to relish forever for they weren't just powerful gems to him. They were surviving relics of his race's ancient past, and one of the proudest aspects of said history too. He was even having second thoughts about stealing them. How could he take these precious emeralds from their displays and hand them over to S.T.I.N.G. like that? They belong to the echidnas! The Chaos Emeralds were their birth right! But he had to accept the horrible truth that he couldn't disobey S.T.I.N.G., not when they could put him through severe punishment that would be a fate worse than death. He had to do it, whether he liked it or not.

And so, he'd contacted Abyss to let her know he'd found the emeralds and was waiting for her to arrive at his coordinates. He hoped they wouldn't desecrate the shrine while they were at it. It was too beautiful to just destroy after all. As he waited for the squid to arrive, her looked over at the Chaos Gauntlet, remembering what he was planning to do with it when the time was right.

"At least that pirate scum has no idea what's coming to her..." he purred, "With any luck, I might get to kill her at the same time I destroy this relic. And S.T.I.N.G. will never suspect a thing..."

"DIMITRI!" shouted a voice, causing Dimitri to start in surprise. He looked round. Shade and Remington had come racing in, both

looking livid. Dimitri was surprised and impressed by how quickly Shade had recovered.

"You pathetic little traitor!" Shade shrieked, "We took you in, and you repay us by attacking us?! I guess everything you said about S.T.I.N.G. was a lie!"

Dimitri merely smiled. "Not entirely." he said, "But I'm afraid I have no time for stories; Abyss is on her way, and if you want to avoid any more pain, I suggest you leave right now."

"I'm not going anywhere." Shade declared, drawing her blades out, "As guardian, it's my duty to protect the emeralds from people like you. And believe me, I've handled MUCH worse than you Dimitri. I was even willing to stand up to Imperator Ix!"

"Ah yes, that crazy old man..." Dimitri murmured, "Imperator Ix was always a short-sighted fool who couldn't see the benefits of our island being in the sky instead of on the ground. I hope you're considerably brighter than he was, my dear."

That was one thing they could agree on, that Ix had been a shallow-minded maniac with delusions of grandeur. Shade would've hated Dimitri even more if it had turned out he supported him. When she was through with him, she would maybe send him to meet her father in the void. Remington stood beside her, drawing out a pair of pistols and aiming them at the S.T.I.N.G. agent. He seemed more amused than anything at who he was up against.

"So it's two of us against a head-in-a-bubble." he sneered, "I'm almost beginning to question how he got the drop on you and Knuckles like that."

Shade glared at Remington but said nothing. She held her blades in front of her, her arms criss-crossed and ready to swing her weapons at the robo-echidna.

"Last chance Dimitri. Give back the gauntlet and leave this place now, or I'll cut you to pieces." she warned, her voice as cold as the Northern Tundra.

Dimitri refused to move, still clutching the Chaos Gauntlet as if his life depended on it. Shade could see he wasn't willing to stand down, so she deployed her helmet and ran towards him with an angry yell of fury. Dimitri knew that even with the gauntlet in his possession, he would be no match for the guardian. He couldn't use the gauntlet as he had no proper hands to use it with and his three-digit claws at the end of his tentacles were all too small for the gauntlet to be of any use. It would just slide off if he tried to wield it. But luckily for him, he wouldn't have to fight Shade for just as the distance between him and her had been fully closed, Abyss sprang seemingly out of nowhere and side-tackled the armoured echidna. She was sent sprawling across the shrine and came to a stop by a nearby plinth that didn't have any emeralds sitting on it. Shade grunted but got back to her feet with no problems at all. She saw Remington take aim and shoot at Abyss, only to miss as the cephalopod cartwheeled out of his way. The pirate captain spiralled towards Remington with her tentacles whipping through the air as she spun. The black-haired echidna threw himself to the side to avoid being hit, feeling the air whip past him as Abyss sailed over him. Abyss skidded to a halt and raised her tentacles, waiting to strike at him. Shade ran up beside Remington, adopting a battle-ready stance as she prepared to cut her down. The squid smirked, her beak curving up into a confident smile that suggested she was in total command and held all the cards.

"Nice suit of armour, peachy." she said sarcastically, "Although I'd say it's a little too form-fitting. Is skin-tight your kind of thing or something?"

"If you're trying to insult me then it's not working." Shade retorted, "I take it that's Abyss, Remington?" she asked.

"Yes guardian, that's her." Remington confirmed.

"And VERY pleased to meet you too!" Abyss sneered, "I've always wanted to take down a guardian! And I mean a REAL guardian, not that snot-nosed shrimp Sadie who thinks she has any chance of being one!"

"Well as it so happens, this guardian you're talking to now is her mother." Shade snarled, "And I'm giving you 10 seconds to give her back before I cut your tentacles off!"

Abyss chuckled. It was a humourless sound, the kind that suggested they weren't taking you very seriously.

"Oh woe is me, I'm now up against Sadie's mother! How ever will I handle this?!" she crowed, her tone mocking and full of arrogance, "Well as it so happens, I gathered all our prisoners to my ship and bought them with me as we came to pick up the emeralds. How's about I reunite mother and daughter for a little while?"

She then whistled, a noise that Shade wouldn't have expected her to be able to do with her beak. The whistle was clearly some kind of signal for a bunch of pirates came over to her. They were carrying somebody with them, a teenage echidna girl who had been tightly bound with rope around her body and a gag tied around her mouth. The sight of her daughter all trussed up like this made Shade's hands shake and her nerves jingle with rage. Sadie tried to cry out to her mother, but couldn't because of the gag.

"See, here she is, all alive and well!" Abyss cried as if the whole thing was a friendly get-together, "And don't worry, I haven't ordered the crew to do anything to her so she's fine."

"Let. Her. Go!" Shade spat the three words with seething hatred in her voice.

Abyss's eyes narrowed, the marine Mobian now switching from rude and arrogant to dark and serious. It was unnerving that she could switch personalities so quickly, both Shade and Remington shuddering at the quick transition.

"I believe you misunderstand your position here, doll-face." the squid said coldly, "You are not in any position to make demands. We hold all the cards as you can see. Dimitri got me the Chaos Gauntlet, and he'll happily hand it over to me the moment I say so."

Dimitri had toddled over to Abyss the whole time she and Shade had been talking. She and Remington hadn't even noticed him, he'd been completely forgotten about until Abyss had mentioned his name. They saw him now, standing directly by the squid with the gauntlet held above him, ready to give to her.

"Also, I have your daughter in hand." Abyss continued, patting Sadie on the head to annoy her, "You'll do anything to get her back...well too bad! I'll do anything I can to keep her! And as is clear to you, my shipmates are all armed."

To emphasize this point, one of the pirates pulled out what seemed to be a flintlock pistol and he pressed it against Sadie's head. It looked old-fashioned, like something in a children's pirate story. But this flintlock was up-to-date, able to fire lasers instead of bullets and Shade had no doubt the weapon was extremely reliable. Sadie whimpered behind her gag, the feel of the gun against her head making her feel sick.

"So go on, chop me up and make me into a soup. It won't do you any good when a single movement of my matey's trigger finger will spread your daughter's brains all over this shrine!" Abyss dared, "What's it going to be guardian. Surrender? Or a front row seat to Sadie's execution?"

"Y-y-you can't do this!" Shade protested, feeling the sweat trickling down her face and to her neck under her helmet, "I-I th-though S-S-S.T.I.N.G. didn't want anyone but Sonic dead! Y-you want to c-convert the world into Robians!"

It was foolish to try and reason with this sick woman, but Shade was determined to try. The situation was spinning helplessly out of control

and she was grasping at whatever straws were left to grasp, hoping anything would work at this point.

"Doesn't mean I have to spare everybody." Abyss scoffed, "Scorn will understand if a few people have to die for our cause. He might even overlook Sadie's death if it means I get you and Knuckles to hand over to them. So I reiterate, do you want Sadie alive or not?"

Shade was in a real dilemma, as anyone would in this sort of situation. She did believe that the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few, but what kind of mother would be willing to sacrifice her own daughter? But she couldn't see any other way out of it

"Tick, tock." Abyss said, mockingly waving her finger like an upside-down pendulum, "You got 5 seconds! 5, 4..."

"Hold it!" came a voice from behind Shade, and Knuckles suddenly appeared, dragging Breakdown with him. He, Julie-Su and Relic had reached the Shrine and heard voices, confirming their fears that Abyss and Dimitri were already there. He'd decided to go in alone with Breakdown; should he get captured, Julie-Su and Relic would still be safe, so they'd still have a chance.

"Counter-offer, squid-head!" Knuckles said, holding Breakdown by the neck, "Release my daughter, or your friend here becomes scrap!"

Shade was horrified. Her husband was willing to kill?! She knew it might be necessary in some situations, but that didn't mean she approved of it.

"I know you don't want Breakdown to be scrapped, Abyss. He is one of S.T.I.N.G.'s founding members!" Knuckles yelled, hoping to drive the point home, "Imagine how mad Scorn would be if he died on your watch!"

Abyss didn't even seem bothered by the counter-offer. If anything, the squid seemed oddly amused by the whole scenario. Her face was curled up into a sneer of confidence and she laughed, the kind of sound Knuckles hadn't expected to hear from her.

"Do you seriously believe that I'm stupid enough to think you'll actually do it, blockhead?" Abyss snorted, "I know you Royal Fighter types! You don't kill unless absolutely necessary! I know Sonic killed Dr. Eggman, but I doubt you have his killer streak, Knuckles."

"It is true." Dimitri added, "He couldn't even kill Imperator Ix and his clan. He merely banished them to the void instead."

Knuckles wasn't surprised that Dimitri knew about that already. The elderly echidna did seem to know a lot about echidna history, past and present. How annoying it was that he decided to bring that up now! Abyss was even less likely to take his offer seriously with that in mind!

"How do you know I haven't developed one over time?" Knuckles protested, desperately trying to save himself.

"You haven't killed Breakdown already, you was willing to bargain with him. That already proves you don't have one." Abyss sneered, "Now enough of this nonsense already. Just hand Breakdown over and give yourself up before your daughter gets her brains blown out!"

The pirate holding the gun against Sadie's head tightened his grip and pressed on harder, almost forcing the gun right through Sadie's skull. Sadie whimpered some more, pleading with her eyes for her dad to do something. Knuckles found himself mirroring his wife's expression, beads of sweat trickling down his head as the situation seemed to spin out of control. What could he do?!

"What about one of your organization's figure heads?!" he protested.

"What about your daughter?" Abyss purred.

The pirate's finger tightened on the trigger, just a millimetre away from firing the shot. Even the slightest twitch would make it go off at this point. There was no chance of them saving Sadie before the pirate shot her. Nobody could move fast enough. Even if they could, any attempt to wrestle Sadie away from the pirate would result in her getting shot. There was literally no way out. Knuckles could well kill Breakdown now, but what would it achieve? It would just leave him and Sadie with their only daughter gone. Besides, Breakdown had been roboticized. They'd just repair him and he'd be essentially "alive" again, but Sadie would stay dead. It was a hopeless bargain. Knuckles felt as if he could punch himself for this idiocy! Why didn't he leave Breakdown in their custody! Then again, they still had information downloaded out of his head so they still had a hidden trump card to use against S.T.I.N.G. later. Plus, Julie-Su and Relic were in hiding so they could change things in their favour. Maybe there was still hope in all of this. Sighing heavily, Knuckles lowered Breakdown to the ground and held up his hands.

"Fine. I give up." he muttered.

"I knew you couldn't do it." Abyss gloated, "You hero types, always the same sanctimonious, holier-than-thou tripe who big themselves up but prove unwilling to go the extra mile. How Eggman failed to conquer you guys is anyone's guess."

Knuckles didn't even have the strength to reply. What could he say that would make anything better. Sadie was staring at her father with horror in her eyes, crying muffled cries of dismay behind her gag. Even Shade looked horrified. It wasn't like her husband to just give-up! She ran over to him, placing her hands on his shoulders.

"Knuckles, we can't just give up like that!" she cried, her voice hoarse with horror.

"It's alright my love." Knuckles looked at her and winked, "I know what I'm doing."

That was enough to tell Shade that things weren't as they seemed. Knuckles had a backup plan! But they couldn't let the pirates know about it. She decided to play along for now, raising her hands just like Knuckles did.

"I surrender as well." she said, sounding defeated.

"As do I." Remington sighed. He wasn't sure what was going on but was going to play along for the time being.

"See, was that so hard?" Abyss crowed, "We could've saved ourselves a load of bother if you just gave yourselves up right away! Tie them up and load them on the ship while me and Dimitri get those emeralds!" she ordered.

The pirates obeyed and grabbed hold of Knuckles, Shade and Remington. In order to make sure that they didn't try anything at the last minute, the pirate holding Sadie at gunpoint was still doing so, keeping the gun against her head as if expecting a last minute ambush. In a matter of seconds, the pirates had tightly bound the three echidnas with rope and to make any attempts to escape impossible, Dimitri crept up to them and zapped them into unconsciousness. He found it somewhat amusing he was doing it to Knuckles and Shade a second time today. Abyss was taking no chances at this delicate stage. The pirates carried away their prisoners, some also carrying Breakdown away so he could be repaired, while Dimitri handed over the Chaos Gauntlet to Abyss.

"It might be easier to carry the emeralds by just using the gauntlet." he said.

Abyss smiled, liking the way the gauntlet felt on her hand as she slipped it on. It had a great weight to it and made her feel powerful. She could feel the energy of the Chaos Emeralds that had been used to make it surge up her arm and through her body. It was quite a sensation. What a find this had been! Now with the gauntlet on, Abyss saw to getting the Chaos Emeralds. They would shrink down to size and fit into the seven slots on the gauntlet, making carrying

them as easy as that. Like Dimitri, she too was puzzled at the sight of the eighth, white Chaos Emerald that was there.

"And here I thought there was supposed to be seven. Ah well, an extra one for me." she shrugged.

As she grabbed the first Chaos Emerald to put into the gauntlet, two pairs of eyes watched her steal the precious emeralds while her crew took away the guardians and Breakdown. Julie-Su had fought off every nerve in her body that told her to attack and try to save everyone. She and Relic were safely hidden, no chance of them being spotted from behind the thick bushes near the Emerald Shrine. They had been horrified to see the plan go horribly wrong but they knew what to do now. Knuckles had told them as such on the way here.

"The poor guardians...that wicked pirate was just too clever for them!" Relic cried.

"I was so tempted to shoot that bitch!" Julie-Su growled, "But that would've given them the excuse to shoot Sadie dead. It was too risky...at least we have our little contingency in mind."

"Quite so." Relic agreed, "They'll never suspect that we know where to find them and we know the way into their base." the pika said brightly, "We'll be able to launch a nasty surprise on them and free the prisoners, and they'll never see it coming!"

"And if we capture anymore S.T.I.N.G. agents, we won't be so generous..." Julie-Su muttered, her voice like ice as she watched Abyss fill in all seven slots on the Chaos Gauntlet.

As soon as the last Emerald was inserted, Abyss threw her head back as she felt a surge of power unlike anything she'd ever felt. It was as if she'd, in every sense, become a god. The power was even healing some of the damage Sadie had done to her face earlier, making Abyss look as if nothing had ever happened to her.

"The power!" she breathed, "Such power! With this, I could remake the world in my image; wipe my enemies with a simple finger snap! I could-"

"Whoa there, missy!" Dimitri said, "Let's not get hasty now. Remember who you are serving."

Abyss just scoffed. "Why should I care about Scorn? He can't hurt me while I wield this."

"Maybe not." Dimitri said, "But how about this: you contact the King and Queen and order a surrender, or else, you'll wipe out all their friends and loved ones in a heartbeat?"

"Hmm, I like that." Abyss said, "Very well, then."

"Of course, S.T.I.N.G. wouldn't allow it as there'd be less people to roboticize, but they'll approve of making our enemies surrender with such a threat." Dimitri purred.

Abyss nodded in agreement, smiling back at him.

"You know old timer? I'm beginning to like you." the squid crooned, "The way you think and how effective you're proving in this mission, I think I might recruit you full time into my crew!"

"You're too kind my dear." Dimitri muttered in a voice dripping with distaste.

Abyss ignored him and headed off back to the ship, still wearing the gauntlet. As there were only seven slots on the gauntlet, she carried the eighth one in her spare hand while Dimitri picked up the Master Emerald and carried it with him as he followed the pirate captain away. He used four tentacles to carry the giant gem and four to walk. Abyss stared at him in amazement, surprised Dimitri could even carry the huge emerald. It seemed to weigh nothing in his claws. Whatever S.T.I.N.G. had done to make him this way, they sure did a good job on it! Maybe he would be a useful part of her crew after all.

As they walked away, Julie-Su and Relic watched them go with the former's eyes full of determination as she itched to carry out the backup plan. As soon as the shrine was empty with no sign that a single pirate had ever been there, Julie-Su and Relic emerged from the bushes and the pink echidna glanced over at the archaeologist.

"So, how do we get to the Isle of Abyss?" she asked.

"I'm so sorry I got captured mom and dad." Sadie said solemnly as she slumped against the wall, "Thanks to me, you two are in Abyss's grasp too."

"No Sadie, I should've known better than to think that sea-devil would actually agree to exchange you for Breakdown." Knuckles muttered, "I can still be such a knucklehead at times! The thought shouldn't have even occurred to me! Me and your mother could've snuck into this base and got you and the others out without needing to get ourselves out! I really should've that this through a little more."

"We were desperate to get our daughter back Knuckles, any parent in that situation could hardly be blamed for thinking irrationally." Shade said softly, "You don't need to put yourself down as well."

Knuckles sighed, still feeling like he deserved some of the blame for this mess. A while after they'd been captured, he, Shade, Sadie and Remington had been thrown into a cell together in what was presumably Abyss's island base. Where else could they be? If they stayed quiet for long enough, Knuckles could swear he could faintly hear the ocean lapping at the shore on the other side of the walls. Abyss hadn't untied any of them, the four echidnas still bound up tight with rope so they couldn't use their arms in anyway. The most they could do was just sit on the floor and struggle. Maybe she wanted to make sure they couldn't break out of the cell, though Knuckles was sure even he would have a hard time getting out of it. The walls were all completely solid and the door itself was completely reinforced, designed to withstand almost all attempts at breaking out. All they could do now was wait for Julie-Su and Relic to

carry out the backup plan, if they could. It was going to be a long, tense wait, that much they knew.

"So what do you think they'll do with us dad?" Sadie asked.

It wasn't like her to sound so scared, but Knuckles could hardly blame her. She'd never experienced anything like this before. She was, in every sense, out of her depth in this kind of scenario. He only wish he could think of anything reassuring to say that would put her at ease, but there was nothing remotely pleasant to say.

"I imagine they'll just hand us over to S.T.I.N.G. so they can do what they want with us." Knuckles growled, "I bet they have a roboticizer waiting for us."

"They can make us the start of what's to come for all of Mobius." Shade said grimly, And just when I'd hoped I'd never experience what it's like to be a Robian again."

"I don't wanna be a robot!" Sadie whimpered, "We've gotta get outta here before they can do that to us!"

"Good thing Relic and Julie-Su are still out there." Knuckles noted, allowing a brief, confident smile to pass his lips, "They might get us out before anything can be done to us. I did tell them to sneak into this place and shut down the power should things go wrong."

"And they have the map of the base thanks to Breakdown so they'll find the power supply." Shade added optimistically, "Abyss thinks she holds all the cards, but she'll soon see that we have an ace up our sleeves."

"Heh, that's one way to look at it." Remington said, smirking confidently.

Sadie felt a little more relaxed with this in mind. Maybe things would turn out OK in the end and they'd make it out. Just then, the cell door opened and Sting entered.

"Sadie, the Captain wants to see you." he said, gesturing with his flintlock, "Alone."

"Don't you touch her!" Knuckles said, struggling to his feet and standing in front of his daughter. Sting just zapped him with his tentacles, causing him to collapse.

"You're not in a position to bargain." Sting said, as he grabbed Sadie by the arm, "Just like you weren't in the shrine. But don't worry; you'll soon join her."

With that, he slammed the door shut and shunted Sadie away. Knuckles and Shade couldn't do anything except wait and wonder on what was going to happen and why Abyss seemed to want Sadie in particular. They knew it wasn't good, whatever it was. They might even be taking this opportunity to bug her, if they so choose.

"And so you have it boss. I have the Chaos Emeralds and the Master Emerald, and all thanks to Dimitri finding the Chaos Gauntlet!" Abyss crowed, showing the gauntlet to her computer screen, "You were right to recruit him Scorn, he's proven to be a most useful ally to me and my crew! And here I thought he didn't look like much."

Abyss had naturally decided to take this opportunity to gloat to her leader about her recent success in obtaining the emeralds and kidnapping several tribesmen, including Knuckles and his family. She'd contacted Scorn and informed him of everything that had happened. The Robian's face was as unreadable as ever, making the squid wonder if he was even pleased with her.

"What about your prisoners?" Scorn demanded. He didn't seem to be in any mood to congratulate his agent, "Have you left any of them alive?"

"Every single one master, just as you wanted. No dead bodies." Abyss replied, "I bugged the two guardians and one of their own

while they were unconscious and now we've got the time, I intend to bug the rest of the prisoners, starting with Knuckles and Shade's little daughter."

"Be quick about it. The sooner you finish with them, the better." Scorn ordered, "We can do without the R.F.S. showing up to rescue them at the last second."

"I know how to deal with them." Abyss sneered, "I can use my new toy to make them cede to us! Imagine it Scorn...I threaten to wipe them all out with a snap of my fingers, and I have the power to back it up! They'll be begging for us to take them in exchange for their lives!"

"And what if they call your bluff?" the scorpion muttered, "You know you won't be allowed to actually carry out that threat as genocide is not what we're striving towards."

"I could just wipe out a handful of prisoners, maybe even test it on a town that nobody cares about." the marine woman shrugged, "Just to show we're serious. Or I could just snap my fingers and make their bases disappear! That could work!"

"Make sure you rely on the gauntlet as a last minute resort." Scorn warned, "I would hate to use our most powerful weapon too early. In the meantime, keep the prisoners as long as you can and bug them all. I will come over and bring them back to our base and have the bugs command them to walk into our roboticizer. They will be a prelude to what will become of Mobius as a whole..."

"Indeed, Master, indeed." Abyss said with a smile, "I will see you soon."

With nothing more to say, she shut off the communications link. At that moment, Sting shoved Sadie into the room, still holding her at gunpoint.

"Ah, and here she is." Abyss said, sneering, "The wittle Guardian girl who never stood a chance against me, even after 10 years."

Sadie glared at Abyss. Despite her feelings of guilt, she was determined not to let Abyss get to her.

"If my memory serves me right, the only reason you captured me at all is because of this walking plate of jelly!" she said.

"Hey!" Sting said, stung by Sadie's insult. If there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was people making fun of him. The one bad thing about being a jellyfish was that there were plenty of ways to make jokes about it. He raised his tentacles to zap the girl, but Abyss stopped him.

"Hey, Hey, it's alright, it's alright." she said calmly, "Let her make her insults; they're all she has left. Besides, you really should've finished me, girl."

"And what do you think I would've achieved by doing that?" Sadie muttered, "I probably still would've been caught anyway. And I'd be setting a terrible example to my village too. How can they trust a guardian who's willing to murder in cold blood?"

"And yet that didn't seem to affect Sonic when he killed Dr. Eggman." Abyss retorted, "Oh and what about that Dr. Finny-Whatshisname guy? I don't see him walking around nowadays! I heard Sonic put him down like a rabid dog back in 2143!"

"It's thanks to him that Enerjak didn't destroy the world, in case that important details was left out to you!" Sadie snapped. She was indignant. Was Abyss trying to imply that Sonic was somehow wrong for killing Finitevus 17 years ago?!

"That was different! It was necessary for Finitevus to die, otherwise we would've all been dead too! Why do you and everybody else at S.T.I.N.G. seem to conveniently forgot about that?"

"Oh don't think for a minute we're ungrateful about that." Abyss scoffed, "Scorn himself even thanks Sonic for stopping that maniac so that it was possible for S.T.I.N.G. to form and get revenge for Eggman's death. So yeah, we haven't forgotten about that."

"Well some gratitude you bastards show..." Sadie spat venomously.

"That's irrelevant anyway, we're not here to talk about moral superiority." the squid dismissed, "I asked for you because my masters wish for me to set you up for their little takeover scheme."

"You're not gonna roboticize me, are you?" the teenage guardian asked, worriedly.

"Couldn't even if I wanted to doll-face. I don't have a roboticizer here." Abyss shrugged, "But that's not what I meant anyway..."

She then picked up a small, rectangular case that was sitting on a nearby desk and she opened it up. The case contained a few tiny robots inside and she picked one out. As soon as it was lifted out of the case, the robot seemed to spring into life. Its optics flashed red and it writhed about between Abyss's fingers, its antennae twitching. Sadie's eyes widened in horror, recognizing the little bug.

"That looks like the little robot they got out of Tails!" she shrieked, "Oh god, please don't put that in me!"

"Sorry squirt, that's what you're getting." Abyss crowed, her tone anything but apologetic, "And don't think we'll get a repeat of that because your precious Nicole will not locate THIS model!"

She then grabbed Sadie by the throat, forcing her mouth open as she gagged loudly. Sadie tried to resist but it was no use. She was tightly tied up and any attempts to close her mouth resulted in Sting zapping her to make her cry out in pain. She was helpless to stop it as Abyss dropped the robot into Sadie's mouth. She tried using her tongue to force it out but it clung on tightly with its tiny legs. It was like an earwig clutching onto something, it would never let go and

nothing would shake it off. Then it forced itself down her throat, disappearing into her body in an instant. Sadie coughed and spluttered heavily, hoping she might be able to hack it up. With any luck, she might even throw up and dispose of it that way. She already felt sick from having the thing put inside her. But then suddenly, Sadie felt a sudden need to sleep. It was part of the roach's programming to make anyone fall asleep so they would forget about the whole thing and leave the R.F.S. completely in the dark. The echidna's head flopped forward as she passed out. When she woke up, she wouldn't remember this and unlike the previous model, it would do a better job on hiding itself and remain dormant so there'd be no tummy-aches to give it away this time. Swoop had seen to it that this model did just that so the R.F.S. would never locate another bug again. Abyss smirked with pleasure.

"That was fun!" she cried.

"That was creepy..." Sting muttered, "We really do this to anyone S.T.I.N.G. captures?"

"Of course!" Abyss retorted, "That's what this whole plan's about! Bug as many people as we can so when the time is right, we can activate them and have them all willingly walk into our roboticizer machine back at base! It's as simple as that!"

"Given how long we've been at it, I wonder how many we've already bugged right now..." the jellyfish said thoughtfully.

"Not enough yet, but we'll get there." the pirate captain said casually, "We're gonna keep at it until Scorn says we're ready. In the meantime, I'm gonna send a message to his majesty, King Sonic, and his little queen that'll hopefully make them surrender to us and then after that, I think we're due for some entertainment. Prep up the fighting ring Sting, I feel like starting a fight with Sadie's daddy! And string her up above the arena, she'll be a great prize to tempt Knuckles into the ring!"

"Aye, aye, cap'n!" Sting cried, saluting as he turned and left the room to do just that.

He took Sadie with him so he could prepare her for the fight. Abyss smiled to herself as she picked up the Chaos Gauntlet and slipped it on again, feeling the surge of power through her arm a second time. She could get used to this! It was such a sensational feeling to have so much power at her disposal! She must be the most powerful Mobian in the world with this tool! She knew it would make Sonic and friends surrender themselves to S.T.I.N.G. After all who were they to ignore a threat that could bring genocide to the world? They'd made sure Enerjak couldn't do it, they wouldn't want a repeat of that possibility...

This is bad, this is bad, so very, very bad! Knuckles, Shade and Sadie are all prisoners of Abyss! And they've all been bugged! The rest of the captured villagers will share the same fate and Abyss has the Chaos Gauntlet! It all seems pretty hopeless, doesn't it? Not entirely. Relic and Julie-Su are still free and are part of Knuckles's back-up plan. It looks as if it's all up to them...

Tune in next time as our heroes end up playing "The Games of Abyss"...